

# **A Duke's Secret Romance**

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ABIGAIL AGAR

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Website: Abigail Agar

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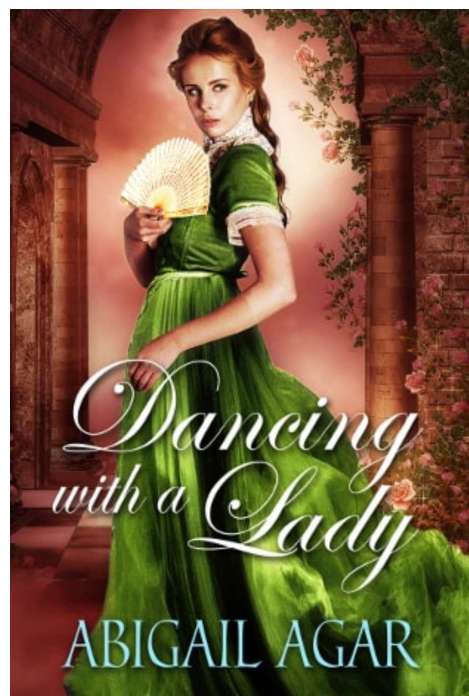
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# A Duke's Secret Romance

## Introduction

The time for the dashing and very eligible Emma Colborne to enter Bath's high society as a debutante has arrived. Unfortunately, the first event of the Season will turn into a big disappointment, after Emma encounters her secret childhood crush, the Duke of Pembrokeshire. Growing up with him as her brother's best friend, she had to endure his enigmatic behavior towards her, and that ball was no different. When her dreamy Duke impolitely refuses to dance with her, Emma knows she must protect her heart and move on. However, when she is pursued by another

nobleman, will she be able to forget her one true love? Or will she keep dreaming of a future that might never come?

John Kennerley, the charming Duke of Pembrokeshire, is a true gentleman, but not very famous for his social skills, especially when it comes to his best friend's sister Emma. No one could ever guess that his cold, distant manners are hiding his deep and eternal love for her though. Reality is that he has been in love with Emma ever since they were children, but his fear of rejection has kept him from revealing the truth. However, when another attractive but dangerous lord appears in Emma's life, John knows that this might be his

only chance to act, before he loses her forever. Will he find the courage to tell Emma how he feels and save her from a dishonoured man who lurks to steal her from him?

As Emma and John dance around each other, they will be forced to face their torn feelings and explore the great love that has been deepening with years, hidden away in their lonely hearts. However, it is difficult to say if their tender romance will flourish, as a mysterious Lord who pursues young debutantes without caring for their reputation, will aim to make Emma one of his victims. With Emma lost in a vicious man's lies, will John manage to gain her trust and protect

their common future? Will the two soulmates finally take a chance to be together, or they are doomed to love each other from a distance?

# Chapter 1

*Bath, England 1812*

“Well, who would have thought it? The Duke of Pembrokeshire has made an appearance at a little Bath assembly.”

John turned round, hearing a jesting voice he knew as well as his own. Before him, his old childhood friend Arthur Colbourne, now the new Duke of Hawksby, walked forward. With dark hair, dark eyes, and sharp facial features, it would not have been surprising for someone to think Arthur was a reserved or even distant man, but John knew that any person who had ever met Arthur found him affable and charismatic, with those deep brown eyes lighting up whenever he spoke.



It was a quality John envied. For his own nervousness towards society, in general, made him appear aloof. He wished he had his friend's easygoing nature instead.

“Arthur.” He laughed and extended his hand to shake. “You’ve talked so much of this event. Where else would I be tonight?”

“You’re forgetting I have a sister to marry off these days. I *have* to attend such things for her. You are lucky in that you do not have the responsibility,” Arthur shook his head with the words, making the dark hair across his forehead dance.

“Hmm, lucky indeed,” John stated, looking away from Arthur to see if he could catch a glimpse of the sister somewhere in the crowd of the assembly.

The Bath Assembly Rooms were crowded and hot tonight. Despite the lofted ceilings and tall windows, with so many people, it was difficult to squeeze past other guests, and the heat of the bodies pressed so close together was cloying.

The long chandeliers that hung from the ceiling basked the room in an apricot-tinged glow that bounced off people's faces. Despite John's wish, he couldn't see Arthur's sister amongst these faces. He could only see a medley of suits, cravats, empire-waist gowns, and elaborate headdresses.

"I haven't seen your sister for some time. A couple of years, I think."

"Even when we finished university, she was still at finishing school," Arthur explained as he passed over a glass of punch. John sipped eagerly, needing the courage of the alcohol for

the imminent meeting about to take place. “She’s talked of little else other than this assembly for days now.”

“Really?” John asked, startled by the news. He remembered almost everything about Emma. With his country seat and Arthur’s adjoining one another’s, as children they had practically grown up in each other’s pockets, and he had grown to know Emma well. “She’s hardly the kind of lady to worry about such folly. Last time I saw her, she had her nose buried in a folio of Shakespeare’s plays.”

“You know her very well.” Arthur smiled. “Though times are changing since you last saw her. My little sister is a lady now, and she knows she must marry soon.”

“So soon?” John asked, lifting his eyebrows in surprise. “Is it really that imperative?”

“It’s my responsibility as her elder brother to ensure that she does. I cannot have my sister becoming a spinster now, can I?” Arthur laughed as he topped his punch glass up from the bowl behind him on a long table.

*I couldn’t think of any woman less likely to be a spinster.*

John stopped himself from saying the words aloud. He had first met Emma when she was just a toddler, and he was a child. It had taken many years to admit the truth, especially because of the slight age difference between them, but by the time Emma was fourteen, John knew the truth of his feelings for her. No other woman would ever compare.

Not that he had ever told her that, and he had little intention of telling her so either. He doubted very much that she would ever take two glances in his direction.

“Where is she tonight?” John asked, looking around the crowd in the hope of seeing her once again.

“I can’t see her right now,” Arthur mused as he too took a glance around. “On that subject, though, there is something I would like to discuss with you.” He turned and pointed a finger in John’s direction.

“Why do I suddenly feel rather put on the spot?” John asked, finding some humor in the situation. “It’s like one of my university lecturers is staring at me again, expecting some lofty answer to an intellectual question.”

“Ah, well, that is what I am hoping for.” Arthur waved his hand to the side, showing he intended to walk around the assembly rooms, and wished for John to join him. He quickly

took up the invitation to walk alongside.

“You have me intrigued. What is your question?”

“At what age do you think it is decent for a gentleman to be married?” Arthur asked, making John flinch in surprise.

“What an odd question. Can there even be an answer?”

“I heard some gentlemen discuss it the other day at a club in town.” Arthur shrugged. “It got me thinking about marriage. After all, Emma has not yet quite reached her twentieth year, and yet here I am intending to marry her off. I’m a few years her senior, and there is no such expectation for me to marry.”

“It’s true; it’s odd how different the expectations are between men and women,” John said as he looked around the crowd again, desperate for one glimpse of her. After a couple of years apart, he was intrigued to see what she looked like now. Would she be much changed? “I feel there is a further question to your discussion here. What is it?”

“My mother made the intimation the other day that perhaps it was time I married too.” Arthur practically grimaced in response.

“Ha! You’d think you were asked to do a great evil from the expression you just pulled,” John said, pointing at his friend’s face.

“I’m not saying I’m averse to the idea.” Arthur shrugged. “It’s just that I haven’t met a young lady yet who I wish to marry. So, this is the question I wish to ask you.”

“Go on,” John encouraged.

“Do you intend to marry any time soon?” Arthur’s question brought John to a sharp halt. His fingers clenched around the punch glass in his hand as his mind worked quickly to conjure a way to deflect the conversation. The last few years, he’d managed to distract himself from thoughts of marriage with the university, yet now his father had passed away, and he had inherited the dukedom, it was being mooted everywhere that it was time he took a wife of his own and produced an heir.

“I ...” John faltered, struggling to know what to say.

“I see I have surprised you!” Arthur chuckled warmly. “Is marriage so shocking to you, my friend?”



“No.” John shook his head. “It’s just been suggested more than once recently. My own mother talks of me producing an heir for the dukedom.”

“Then you have the same problem I have.” Arthur nodded. “So, what are your thoughts on getting married just for the sake of producing an heir?”

John’s reaction was instant. He didn’t talk of who to marry; in fact, he made a specific attempt to push Emma’s memory out of his mind, but he was determined to talk of the one resolution he had made on marriage.

“I don’t think any man should marry for arrangement. Least of all, just to produce an heir.” John shook his head. “It’s what’s talked of, especially any gentleman in our position

has this huge expectation, but quite frankly, I couldn't think of a more miserable life than to spend it with a woman you had no care for whatsoever. Many a man takes a mistress in such a situation, and I certainly don't ever want to be one of those men."

"Admirably spoken indeed," Arthur said, smiling as he led them further around the room once again. The violins on the room's far side had now struck up their opening tune for the night, and some space was being made in the centre of the floor for dancers to take their places. "I feel reassured that at least I am not the only duke out there averse to marrying for the sake of it then."

"I can assure you that you are not."

"And have you met this woman you speak of?" Arthur asked, making John's brows knit together.

“What woman?”

“Well, you inferred that you would only marry if you found a woman to care for. Have you met her yet?” Arthur’s question made John look away and turn his attention firmly to the dancers. He could hardly confess that the only woman who had ever made him think of marriage was Arthur’s own sister.

“No,” he sighed, reaching for a lie. “So, maybe I will be one of those gentlemen who never marry.” He genuinely meant it. After all, if Emma were the only person to inspire such feelings, what chance did he have?

“I hope that is not the case,” Arthur said reassuringly and patted John on the back. “Ah, there’s Emma now.” John flicked his head back around in anticipation, searching for her through the crowd. “Emma?” Arthur called to

his sister.

A young woman turned their way, standing amongst a bunch of other guests, and strode forward. John recognized her instantly. Though a couple of years had passed, her features were still familiar. Those soft brown eyes were the first thing he saw; they were bold and large in her face, followed by a gently sloping nose and thin lips.

Her face was petite in structure and flattered by a gentle smattering of freckles across her cheeks. The dark auburn hair he could remember flowing down past her shoulders when she was a child was now tied up into an elegant chignon, with a few wayward curls hanging down to frame her features.

The years away from her had only meant that she had matured in her beauty. She was tall now too, almost as tall as him, which was a feat indeed. She had a presence as she strode

toward them, her chin high and her curvaceous figure highlighted by the ivory empire gown she wore with a deep neckline and pearled beads around her waist.

As she reached them, John tried to tamp down on the fluttering sensation in his stomach, but it was no good. It was as though Emma were a sorceress, who had placed him under a spell simply by standing beside him.

*Emma, what have you done to me?*

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*John is here again!*

Emma was struggling to take control of her smile. The man she had been besotted with for

as long as she could remember was standing beside Arthur as she walked toward them. To her dismay, when she reached John's side, he set his gaze on his punch glass instead, seemingly much more interested in that than in her.

"Emma, you remember John?" Arthur said warmly at her side, gesturing to him.

"How could I forget?" Emma smiled. "You two hardly spent a day apart as children. How are you, John?" She used his first name rather than his formal address. After all, they had been children together. One of her finest memories was of a day when she had fallen in the river on her family estate, and John was the one to pull her out. After that moment, with John's arms around her waist and hers around his neck, surely, they didn't need titles between them anymore?

He lifted his blue gaze from his punch bowl

and looked to her, offering a smile that seemed to her to be rather restrained.

“I am well. It is good to see you again, Lady Colbourne.” The moment he used her formal title, Emma felt her stomach sink. The excitement at seeing John again after all this time became swallowed by sadness.

*With how well we know each other, he still doesn't like me very much, does he?*

“And you,” Emma took a small step backwards, realizing that she now had to make a hasty retreat. She'd rather hoped that with not having seen each other for two years, he might have warmed up to her a little bit, but no. But she was determined to have one more go at softening his cold exterior. “I've heard much from Arthur of your time together in Cambridge,” she said, offering a smile. “He has told me of some interesting escapades about the two of you. In particular, I

remember a tale about you both on the river late at night and *someone* ending up in the river instead of on the boat.”

Arthur laughed warmly just as John’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I admit, I did tell her about that story.” Arthur was still struggling to control his laughter.

“Why?” John asked.

“Because it is one of the most amusing stories I have to tell,” Arthur said, managing to control his mirth.

“Well, I hope you’ll be able to tell me such stories of my brother too.” She addressed John



with the statement.

“Perhaps not, Lady Colbourne,” John said tightly, looking past her shoulder at the crowd beyond. “Such stories are maybe not so suitable for this formal setting.”

Emma felt her spine stiffen in response. It seemed he was determined to be cold and distant with her, no matter what the subject was. Clearly, he was still intent on being the aloof gentleman he liked to be with everyone. It was evident she was no different to him than any other lady.

Feeling a little pain in her chest, she was determined not to reveal it on her face.

“Well, I should return to my friend,” she said boldly, preparing to turn away. “I will not prey upon your time any longer, Your Grace.”

She used his formal address and chose her words carefully. He seemed to understand her meaning, for his eyebrows raised as he peered at her over the rim of his glass. Arthur seemed not to notice the intended slight she gave.

“Emma, before you go,” Arthur took her arm and pulled her forward again, leading her back toward John. “Maybe you could dance with John?”

“I’m s-sorry?” Emma stuttered in surprise.

“You have attended finishing school, and we are somewhat out of practice because of university.” Arthur smiled. “You should see the way we danced there. Picture two horses dancing, and you probably can imagine the rather ungainly picture.” Emma was tempted to laugh at the image he had created, but her mind was still occupied by the suggestion he had made.

“That is not necessary, Arthur,” John said, holding out his hand as though physically trying to dissuade the idea.

“Nonsense, Emma’s dance card hasn’t yet been filled,” Arthur carried on as if the objection hadn’t been made. “I’m sure you would appreciate the tutelage, wouldn’t you, John?”

Emma didn’t know what to say. Her practical mind knew she should extract herself from this situation as soon as possible, whereas the childish part of her urged her to stay quiet. She wished to know whether he would say yes or no. The last time she danced with John, it was before finishing school when her mother was trying to teach her how to dance. He’d been aloof the whole way through the lesson, yet she could still remember the way his hand had felt in hers.

*Please say yes.*

“What do you say, John?” Arthur urged again as John took another sip from his punch glass.

“I say that I am not inclined to dance tonight.” He lowered the glass back down and raised his chin high. He didn’t even look at Emma as he said the words. “I’m sure Lady Colbourne will excuse me, but I am not enticed by the idea and would prefer to stand here.”

Emma’s mouth fell open in surprise. She had never heard him be so rude in his life. The words were offensive, yet he had said it all in a polite tone that suggested he thought he could get away with it.

“If you would excuse me,” Emma said quickly, trying to maintain a smidgen of self-respect. “My friend has just arrived; enjoy your

evening.”

She bobbed a quick curtsy to John and walked past him as quickly as she could, heading for her friend who had just appeared through the doorway. The whole walk, she had to keep her chin high, for fear if she let it fall, she would feel as small as John’s words had clearly intended her to feel.

## Chapter 2

“Anne! Thank goodness you are here.” Emma reached for her closest friend in the world. Anne quickly disentangled herself from her family and rushed forward to take both of Emma’s hands.

“Well, you seem in a state, dearest?” Anne asked, her green eyes wide in worry. “Has something happened?”

“Something has happened, and I feel I must impart it now before I start a cycle of self-loathing.” Emma looped her arm with Anne’s and dragged her away across the room, finding a corner far away from most of the guests and as far as possible away from the dance floor.

“Are we hiding?” Anne asked, smiling. “I rather like this idea if so. Shall we hide here all night behind the candelabras?” She pointed at the nearest candelabra, and Emma laughed warmly. She loved her friend dearly. Anne was from quite a different class. Though a respected family, she had no title and no fortune, which meant enough people had warned Emma away from being friends with her. Emma had strongly rejected this, for Anne was both one of the kindest people she had ever known and one of the funniest.

“Oh, I have missed you while you have been in the country,” Emma said, refusing to let go of her friend’s hand just yet.

“I can tell, squeeze much harder, and you’ll detach my hand from my wrist.” Anne produced a mocked look of pain, drawing out more laughter from Emma. “Well, I’m pleased to see I have made you laugh, but evidently, something has happened. What is it?”

“It is just a friend of my brother’s.” Emma sighed, more frustrated and pained by the encounter than she liked to admit. She had never told anyone of the soft spot she had always had for John, and she had no intention of revealing it now.

She would just have to tell her tale while leaving out a few significant details. “The Duke of Pembrokeshire, he’s over there.” Emma pointed him out from where he was still standing beside Arthur. The two of them were laughing heartily about something.

“The tall handsome one with dark hair?” Anne asked.

“He is not so handsome.” Emma rolled her eyes just as Anne looked back at her with a smirk across her lips.



“Hmm, remember that old famous Shakespeare line of the lady doth protest too much methinks?”

“Anne!” Emma waved at her, urging her to be quiet.

“Emma, there is no shame in acknowledging a man is handsome.” Anne shrugged. “If a man can comment on a woman’s beauty, then a woman can definitely comment equally as much on a man’s good looks. So, tell me what this handsome duke said that has worked you up so much?”

“It is just ...” Emma paused and looked back to John again. His guard was down now, and he was clearly smiling a lot with Arthur.

*Why can't he be so relaxed with me?*

“I have known the duke ever since I can remember,” Emma whispered to Anne conspiratorially. “Our family have always been intimate friends. He and my brother spent most days together growing up, so I did with him too. For all the past we share, all the history, and all the stories, he still must address me as ‘Lady Colbourne,’ and he treats me with less warmth than he would a dog. I’m quite convinced of it.”

“Oh my.” Anne winced. “Did he say something to you?”

“Arthur suggested that we should dance together.” Emma shrugged as though it were no big deal to her. “I was not averse,” she lied, for she had been hopeful indeed. “It could have been good practice, but he dismissed me, saying he was not inclined to dance and that the idea of dancing with me was no

‘enticement’.” She mocked the very word he had used. “How abominably rude!” Emma fully expected her friend to join in with her condemnation, but to her surprise, she only saw Anne staring across the room, biting her lip in thought. “Anne, did you not think it was rude?”

“Yes, of course.” She nodded, glancing back Emma’s way briefly before turning her eyes to John. “I was just wondering if there was more to this.”

“What do you mean?” Emma retracted her hand from Anne’s and began to make an impression of busying herself with her dance card.

“Emma, you look as though you are hiding something.” Anne elbowed her, urging her to lower the dance card once again.

“No, I’m not.” She stood straight.

“Oh, really?” Anne giggled. “Because I was just going to suggest that perhaps you are so offended by the duke’s rejection because there is more than just a friendship between you?”

“What a notion!” Emma said sharply. “There is no such thing. On the contrary, there is not even friendship.” She felt her frustration grow the more she thought of how John had brushed her off in the past. “I just attempted civil conversation with him, and he denied to take part. The last memory I have of him, he even made arrangements to avoid taking a carriage with me, choosing to ride his horse instead. When my mother was giving the two of us dance lessons years ago, he made it clear then how much he objected to the idea. This man cannot bear the idea of friendship, let alone anything else.”

When Emma had finished with her spiel, she looked back to Anne, finding her still smiling.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

“Because I still think there could be something here you are not telling me.” Anne shrugged. “How fond of the duke are you?”

“Anne!” Emma made a fuss of pushing her loose curls back behind her ears so that she would have something else to do. “I am not fond at all. I’m ... indifferent to him!”

“Then why would you care about him being rude to you? I know I am hardly the most educated lady there is, but even I can tell with my limited intelligence that your statement doesn’t quite make sense,” Anne said with a giggle. Emma wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed or amused that her friend had found

her out so easily.

“You shouldn’t put yourself down so.” Emma sighed. “You know I think you are very intelligent.” She’d heard Anne belittle herself so much that it was her constant task to build up her friend’s confidence again.

“Ah! So, I am right? My guess was correct?”

“Anne, stop it.” Emma laughed at her now, waving her hand to brush away the idea. “Look, all I am saying is that I am frustrated that a man I always thought was my friend is still clearly intent on never being my friend. That hurts. So, I have made a decision.”

“And that decision is?” Anne asked, just as Emma straightened her spine in resolve.

“I will give up,” she said dismissively. “If he does not wish to be my friend, then I will no longer try to make him my friend. If he hates me so much, I’ll leave him in peace to carry on hating me.”

“Hmm ...” Anne tapped her chin in thought. For a minute, Emma thought she had concluded the conversation, but Anne’s pensiveness intrigued her too much to let it go.

“Hmm, what?” she asked.

“Perhaps he cares for you too?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am being serious,” Anne said plainly. “I know it’s a rarity for me. I infinitely prefer a jest in life and would much rather talk of something light than something serious, but on this occasion, I promise you I am being sensible. What if the duke cares for you too and is attempting to flirt with you?”

“Flirtation?” Emma shook her head. “If that is flirtation, then good God, how does anyone ever get married?”

“There is no rule that says a man must be good at flirtation.” Anne laughed. “In fact, from what I hear, many men are actually quite bad at it.”

“I am sure you are quite wrong.” Emma stepped forward just as an idea struck her. “I know. I will prove it to you.” She took Anne’s hand.



“Prove what to me?”

“I will introduce you to the duke, and you can see for yourself what an unpleasant manner he has around me,” Emma began to tow Anne across the room.

“Emma, he is a duke! I am a woman of no position. You can’t introduce me to such a man.” Anne began to fuss with her light brown hair. “It was awkward enough when you introduced me to your brother.”

“Nonsense.” Emma brushed the idea away. “Why should you not be introduced to a duke?” She had to stop walking regardless, aware that Anne had dug her heels into the floor and was hurrying to straighten her dress.

“A duke as handsome as that? Believe me; I

have many reasons for staying on the other side of the room.”

“You need not worry,” Emma assured, taking her hand again. “With how unpleasant the Duke of Pembrokeshire is in conversation, you could outclass him any day of the week!” She said the words kindly, meant to buoy Anne’s confidence, but as she turned around, she found John was standing much closer than she had expected.

He was walking towards her, with Arthur following close behind, and though Arthur was out of earshot, John had evidently heard, for his feet faltered slightly, and there was an expression on his face that Emma did not recognize.

*Oh dear ... well, he’s certainly not going to want to be my friend now, is he?*

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John was gutted. It was as though Emma had winded him with her comments. As his feet faltered beneath him, he felt the truth of her statement. He had been unpleasant in conversation. Not only that, but he had also been intentionally cruel, all with the hope that he could keep a distance between them and stop himself from liking her any more than he already did. Evidently, all he had achieved was hurting Emma's feelings.

"Oh! What happened?" Arthur stumbled into his back; the collision was sudden, making John whip around. "You all right, John?"

"I'm fine," he lied. He made up his mind quickly. He had to apologize to Emma. Now. "I just need to speak to your sister about something. Could you give me a minute to talk alone with her?"

“Ha!” Arthur suddenly laughed. “I think you’re too late.”

“What?” John looked round to see there was now a gentleman standing between him and Emma, with his back turned and blocking John out completely.

“Wait, Lord Bolton?” Arthur suddenly stepped forward, walking around the two of them to put himself into the conversation. “It is you; how good to see you again.” As Arthur extended his hand to the stranger to shake, John jumped forward as well, keen not to be left out of the introduction.

“Your Grace,” Lord Bolton said with an affable smile. “So good to see you too. I was just attempting to introduce myself to your sister. Would you be so kind as to do the honours?”

John's chest twisted at the ease and charm with which he spoke. It was not a skill he could ever hope to have.

"I'd be delighted to," Arthur said. "This is my sister, Lady Emma Colbourne, her friend Miss Anne Braithwaite, and my friend, the Duke of Pembrokeshire." John bowed when it was his turn, but he didn't miss the fact that Lord Bolton never took his eyes off Emma all the way through the introduction. "Emma, this is Lord Antony Bolton."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, My Lord." Emma curtsied and offered a smile John wished was just reserved for him.

"Believe me, Lady Colbourne, the pleasure is mine." At the evident flirtation the lord made, Emma smiled. It made John fidget where he

stood, moving from one foot to another. "I was wondering if you would do me the honour of the next dance, Lady Colbourne?"

*Please say no!*

"I'd be delighted." Emma offered her hand instantly. From behind her back, John involuntarily stepped forward. Anthony didn't see it, for it he lapsed into conversation with Miss Braithwaite, but Lord Bolton did see it. As he took Emma's hand and led her away, he cast a triumphant glance back to John as though he could sense the sudden territorial urge that had erupted.

"You all right, John?" Arthur asked. For a minute, John didn't answer. He just watched Emma walk away hand in hand with Lord Bolton. He was a rather odd-looking figure, thin and gangly with red hair, but he had a kind of charm in his person that would probably make many women hang on his

words. John though, was not so easily fooled. He didn't like him already. "John?"

"Arthur, who is Lord Bolton?" John pointed toward the retreating figure of Lord Bolton as he and Emma took their places on the dance floor.

"If you would excuse me, Miss Braithwaite." Arthur bowed to Emma's friend before steering John away so they could talk in private. "Lord Bolton is a gentleman I know reasonably well. He's the son of a man who was good friends with my father when he was alive. The family is wealthy, respected, old money, though I hear their investments in America are profiting well."

This didn't answer John's question. He'd merely heard a summary of Lord Bolton's business matters rather than who he was like as a person.

As John and Arthur circled the dance floor, he watched how Emma and Lord Bolton danced together. Every time Lord Bolton took Emma's hand and touched her back or shoulder, he felt anger spike inside him.

"Arthur, is this such a good idea?" He lowered his voice and turned back to his friend to stare him in the eye.

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked, frowning.

"Allowing your sister to dance with that man?" John gestured to the dance floor. "Emma is a fine woman. She should make a good connection."

"While I'm pleased to hear you talking so finely of my sister," Arthur said pointedly,



chastising John a little for his behaviour earlier, “Lord Bolton is a good man who would be an eligible connection.”

“How can you be sure?” John asked, shaking his head. “You do not seem to know so much about him.”

“Perhaps not, but what I do know is all good,” Arthur assured, taking John’s shoulder in a comforting gesture. “You don’t need to worry about Emma.”

“I am worried,” John said boldly, gesturing back to the dance floor. “She is dancing with a perfect stranger. Is it not your responsibility to be cautious of the men she dances with?” To his surprise, Arthur laughed warmly.

“John, you hardly need to be jealous of the responsibility I have towards my sister.”

“I beg your pardon?” John frowned, not following the conversation.

“I know you grew up alongside Emma too, and of course, you wish to see her well settled, but her marriage is my responsibility, not yours, and believe me, it is not a task you should envy.” Arthur smiled, even though he shook his head. “It’s full of constant questions and uncertainties for what is best for her. It’s quite a task, but at the very least, Emma has made the task rather simple.”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“Well, imagine the task for brothers who have sisters with no title, no wealth, no beauty, and no intelligence?” Arthur said, shrugging his shoulders. “Emma has it all! Fortunately, because she is intelligent, she can spot a fool

or a cad as well as I can. She is perfectly safe and very unlikely to fall victim to any rake.”

“Hmm.” John was not so convinced. Lord Bolton’s name was beginning to ring a bell in his head, but he couldn’t quite remember where he’d heard it before. He racked his brains, trying to think of it just as Arthur carried on speaking.

“You don’t need to worry about her now, John. Lord Bolton is from a good family; besides, it is just one dance. They are hardly going to be betrothed after just one dance, are they?”

John hoped with every fibre of his being that they wouldn’t be.

## Chapter 3

As Emma curtsied to Lord Bolton, she was very aware of his eyes watching her intently. It all felt a little strange as the music started up, and they began to dance together. When Lord Bolton had asked her to dance, she had been very eager to accept, thrilled to show John that even if he weren't interested in dancing with her, that others did not find the idea of her company so repulsive.

Now that she had actually accepted the invitation to dance, though, she was painfully aware of how much Lord Bolton stared. Even as they began to move in their cotillion, he didn't attempt conversation; he just looked at her.

She cleared her throat, determined to speak.

“I do not think I have seen you before at such events as these, My Lord,” she said, attempting something quite formal. “Is this your first time in Bath?”

“My father’s estate is in the country, and I mostly spend my time at our townhouse in London. I am currently spending a few months with my father’s uncle in Bath and was eager to attend society’s events.” He offered her a smile that tilted up just one side of his lips. “After this evening, I have to say I am pleased I made such a decision. Forgive me for being forward, Lady Colbourne, but with a dance partner like you, I am wondering why I have not visited Bath before.”

She felt warmed by his words, so much that her cheeks heated, and she looked away, focusing on the dance instead. They were the kind of words she often wished to hear, but it was not the man saying them she had hoped for.

“And how else do you find Bath?” she asked, trying to push all thoughts of John from her mind and focus on the gentleman before her. He was sort of handsome. He had a charming smile, and his manner was charismatic.

*Perhaps if I just give him a chance, he could inspire the sort of feelings John gives me in time.*

“I am enjoying exploring the Somerset countryside in particular,” he said as he took her hand and led her in a small circle in the centre of the dance floor. His grasp was quite firm, though not insistent.

She supposed it should have made her heartbeat increase, but it did not. “Of course, London does not have such beauties around it as Somerset does. There’s Cheddar Gorge, castles, and so much more. I even went as far

as Wiltshire the other day with the express purpose of seeing Stonehenge.”

“Well, if it’s monuments you like to see, then you should visit Glastonbury Abbey while you are staying here.” Emma was about to talk of all the history she knew of the abbey. Such things were her passion. The past and all people’s lives that had gone before her own intrigued her, yet she reigned herself in. Prattling on about history might bore her current dance partner.

“If you recommend it, then I must certainly go,” Lord Bolton said, lowering his voice and bringing the two of them close together. She was shocked at the whispering voice. A second later, they swapped partners, just momentarily in the orchestrated dance, allowing her to have a breather from the press of Lord Bolton’s hands and his whispered words. When she looked back to him, though, she found he was still staring at her.

When she returned to his grasp, her breath felt a little shuddery. She supposed this was how excitement and true flirtation felt. It did not explain, though, why her fingers were tempted to tremble.

“I think to really enjoy the abbey, I must have someone to enjoy it with,” he said as he placed one hand on her back and his other in her grasp. His touch on her back was acute, making her cheeks blush even more. “Perhaps you would do me the honour of giving me your company for such a trip?”

She looked up in shock. They hadn’t yet known each other for the length of a single dance, and he was already offering such invitations.

“I ... well ...” she faltered before thinking of how absurd it was to let herself be so dazzled by a man taking an interest in her. Perhaps



this was just what she needed, someone who actively took an interest and not only that but flirted with her! Wasn't this life preferable to always suffering the coldness and indifference of someone she cared about? "I suppose," she said, offering a smile of her own. "But I would like to know my companion a little better first."

"Then, while I am in Bath, I hope we will have the opportunity to know each other *very* well indeed," he said the word with stress and whispered it in her ear just as they began to walk around each other in circles again. This time, his flirtation made her smile grow even further. "I trust your calendar for this year's society events is busy?"

"It is," she agreed with a nod.

"What of Sir Gregory's ball next week? And the concert at the Royal Theatre?"

“I am to attend both, My Lord,” she agreed with a nod. “I trust I will see you at these events too?”

“You will indeed.” He held her hand for a beat longer than the dance stipulated. She retracted it as quickly as she could, wary that someone else might be watching the two of them. As she turned in a circle, her gaze turned on the other guests, seeking out Anne in the crowd to see if she was watching. She didn’t find Anne, but she did find someone watching her intently.

*John.*

She whipped her head back around, trying not to think of why he was staring at her so intensely as she returned to Lord Bolton’s side.

“Then I look forward to each event of the Season, Lady Colbourne. If you are to be at all of them, I know they will be fine evenings to enjoy.” He offered the last flirtatious comment just as she curtsied, and he bowed, bringing their dance to an end.

He took her hand one last time and began to lead her away from the dance floor.

“Unfortunately, I must speak to some friends and acquaintances now,” he said, sighing as though it were a great pain to be away from her. “I must be polite and do the rounds, though I would dearly love to stay by your side and know you better, My Lady.” He offered a wink, and she was startled by the audacity of it, but she was also rather excited by it too. “I hope that I will have the opportunity to speak to you again later this evening? Perhaps over a glass of punch?”

“I look forward to it,” she said, curtsying again, just as he bowed. The whole way through the action, he didn’t release her gaze. He just held onto it before turning and walking away, glancing back more than once as he disappeared through the crowd.

Emma placed a hand to her stomach as he left, hoping to calm the nerves that had made her stomach tighten. Desperate to speak to Anne of what had just occurred, she searched the guests’ faces. In the candles from the chandeliers and candelabras, it was not easy to make out anybody’s faces, but she did see someone she knew still staring right at her.

John was a distance across the room, with Arthur at his side and a bundle of other gentlemen too. John did not appear interested in their conversation at all, for his eyes were on her instead.

Her heartbeat picked up, just in the way she

had hoped it would do when Lord Bolton flirted. Frustrated her own body was betraying her at being flattered by the attention of a man who did not like her, she turned her head sharply away and looked for Anne.

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“Well, that was interesting.” Anne sighed as she stepped off the dance floor and hurried to Emma’s side.

“Who was that you were dancing with?” Emma asked, looping their arms together and leading her friend over to the corner of the room where they had hidden earlier that evening.

“His name was Sir Theodore Walpole,” Anne said. “Quite a businessman in town, if you believe every word he says. Oh, my goodness,

I had to clamp my lips together to prevent myself from yawning! How tiresome.” She chuckled, prompting Emma to laugh too. “Well, my evening’s dances have been quite the failure, but yours appear to have been interesting. Care to tell a little more about Lord Bolton?”

“I do not know what to make of it.” Emma shook her head just as Anne collected two glasses of punch and presented one for Emma to take. “He was incredibly ...”

“What? Kind? Interesting? Affable?” Anne prompted with eagerness.

“Forward,” Emma concluded with a firm nod.

“Forward? Ha!” Anne giggled under her breath. “I suppose that is no bad thing.”

“Do you not think so?” Emma asked. “To be honest, I was very flattered by his attention, but the obvious flirtation I cannot figure out if it made me happy or a little ... unsettled.”

“I merely mean forward is good because you know where you stand, don’t you?” Anne pointed out, gesturing across the room. “You have one gentleman here tonight who has made it as plain as day that he enjoys your company and wishes to dance with you. Then you have another gentleman who refuses to dance with you despite knowing you since you were a child. Isn’t it better to know where you stand?”

“It is,” Emma nodded, understanding exactly what Anne meant.

“The question is if Lord Bolton’s flirtation is enough to make you stop thinking of the Duke

of Pembrokeshire?" Anne teased, betraying a small smile.

"You are mischievous tonight!" Emma laughed. "You know perfectly well I feel nothing for the duke. I have told you as much."

"That you have. In fact, you have talked about him so much this evening that many a person would conclude that there was something there beyond just cordial respect." Anne's mischief made Emma narrow her eyes.

"Remind me why I am friends with you?" Emma said in jest.

"Because you like the fact I am not as formal or as restrained as the other young ladies here tonight."



“That is true.” Emma nodded, looping her arm with Anne’s again. “That being said, you can stop making so many comments about the Duke of Pembershire.”

“Why?” Anne asked with a look of innocence on her face. “I’m rather enjoying myself by making such comments.”

“Because you’re trying to cause trouble where there is none.” Emma shrugged. “I wish to talk of Lord Bolton instead.”

“As you wish.” Anne nodded. “So, what did you really think of Lord Bolton?”

“He was ... charming,” Emma concluded. “He made an invitation for me to accompany him on a visit to Glastonbury Abbey while he is

staying in Bath.”

“Forward indeed.” Anne widened her eyes. “Most men would save such an invitation for a third or fourth meeting. Your beau made the invite after you hadn’t finished dancing with him! I always knew you were a fine dancer. You must have impressed him.” Anne’s jest made Emma laugh all the more. “The question is, though, did you actually like Lord Bolton? For that is something you haven’t yet said.”

“I ...” Emma paused, considering the idea. She cast a quick glance around the room but couldn’t see him. He may have retired to the card room or the smoking room by now. “I was flattered by his attentions.”

“That wasn’t quite a declaration for liking him.” Anne shook her head.

“I suppose not.” Emma chewed her lip in thought for another minute. “I guess that I *could* like him. Perhaps I just need to get to know him better.”

The violins struck up again, and Anne cast her eyes to the ceiling in a pleading motion.

“Something wrong, Anne?”

“It is my next dance partner for the night,” Anne whispered to her, just as a familiar gentleman walked forward through the crowd. “Mr Hamilton.”

“I thought you had turned down his proposal last month?” Emma asked under her breath.

She knew well the pressure Anne was under to

find an eligible match and settle down from her family. Without a strong position, title, and very little dowry indeed, the match was not expected to be a fine one. In fact, her mother had actively pushed her towards Mr Hamilton, who came from small wealth and would be a decent match.

The only problem was that Anne found Mr Hamilton's company rather dreary, and he was unable to partake in the jests by which she lived her life. Emma had seen the two together often enough to know that Anne deserved someone who understood her good humour much better.

"I did reject him," Anne said with a sigh. "Somehow, my mother has outmaneuvered me again and has suggested to him that my refusal is not final. Mothers!" she complained just as Mr Hamilton stood a little distance away, waiting for her.

“Mothers, indeed,” Emma agreed, for her own mother was the one suggesting to Arthur that it was time she married herself. “Well, good luck.”

“Any chance I could feign an ankle injury, and you could help me out of here?” Anne asked, her question somewhere between the line of a jest and complete seriousness.

“No chance. If your mother sees me helping you, I’ll be the one she tells off.” Emma laughed and prodded Anne in the back, urging her forward again. Anne placed a polite smile on her face and stepped forward to meet Mr Hamilton.

With Anne gone, Emma’s mind lingered on the question.

*Do you like him?*

If she were to discover whether she could like the man or not, she needed to know more about him, and there was one man who could help her with that. Arthur.

## Chapter 4

John nearly choked on his punch when he heard Arthur mention Emma's name.

"There you are, Emma," Arthur said, turning around just as Emma appeared beside them. John tried to clear his throat and appear formal. He'd just been saying to Arthur again that he thought they should be wary of Lord Bolton, and he was concerned Emma may have overheard. "How was your dance with Lord Bolton?"

"Intriguing," she said with a smile before sipping her punch.

"Intriguing?" John tried to keep the note of surprise out of his voice. In all his days, he'd

never heard anyone describe a dance in such a way before. It did not bode well for him.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said before looking back to Arthur again. Hearing how Emma had gone from calling him John to ‘Your Grace’ in a matter of one evening was gutting. Even though he knew he only had himself to blame for it. “I was wondering what else you knew of the man, Arthur?”

“Why?” John asked, interrupting the conversation another time. He did not miss the startled looks both Arthur and Emma gave him.

Arthur, in particular, from behind Emma’s shoulder, was looking at him and mouthing the words: ‘What’s wrong?’

“Because I wish to know more of the man,”



Emma said with a smile. “He seemed very charming and has intimated he looks forward to seeing me at more events this Season. I would like to know more of who the man is.”

John’s hand clenched tighter around his punch glass.

“He comes from a good family.” Arthur nodded. “His family have old money, rumour has it they go all the way back to the Howards, but they also have new money from investments, so they have been smart about it.”

“Why do you do that?” Emma said, with evident disapproval of her brother, shaking her head and bearing a smirk.

“Do what?” he asked.

“I ask for a description of a man, and you give me his financial background instead. It’s as though I am discussing going into business with the man, not just trying to make a new acquaintance.”

“That’s what I said,” John explained, pointing at Arthur as he addressed Emma. “When I asked him about Lord Bolton, the description was practically exactly the same. It seems your brother puts a lot of value in who a man is related to and the money he has, more than the man he is.”

“Well, how absurd,” Emma said with a laugh. “Is it the prerogative of a duke to always look at men in such a way?”

“Hardly.” John laughed, shaking his head. “I certainly do not.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” she said, smiling at him. John was wrongfooted for a moment, startled by how easily he had fallen into conversation with Emma. It was like old times again; one minute, he would be pushing her away, trying to be as cold as possible, and the next minute, he would have let down his guard and be enjoying conversation with her.

She was always someone he could enjoy speaking with. Her conversation delighted him more than any other.

“Could you really be so material, brother?” Emma looked to Arthur, who held a hand to his chest in mock shock. “Your friend, you can see here is hardly so shallow.”

“I can’t believe I am the one being accused here.” Arthur laughed. “I’d like to point out that my accuser here, yes, you John, actually

refused to dance tonight with the sister of a duke. If even that can't lure you, then you must be looking to dance with ladies who are practically princesses." He was still chuckling at the idea, even as John shook his head. He purposefully didn't look at Emma, for he did not need reminding of how he had turned her down earlier that evening.

He hadn't meant any slight. He just needed to defend himself from further longing for her.

*She can never be with me.*

"I think His Grace's actions only emphasize his point." There was a note of sadness in Emma's tone that made him look back to her. "He refused someone of my position because he objected to the dancer, not the position."

"Wait, that wasn't –" Before John could say

any more, Emma continued to speak.

“Anyway, we are getting off-topic.” She fixed her gaze on Arthur, leaving John with his mouth half hung open. “What do you know of Lord Bolton as a person, Arthur?”

“Good man.” Arthur nodded. “Lousy at cards; I won against him last week at a club in town.”

“That is still not the kind of thing I’m after,” Emma said pointedly.

“I figured.” Arthur sighed. “Well, it’s John who you should be asking this question to.”

“Why? Do you know Lord Bolton, Your Grace?” she asked him.

“No, it’s just I’m sure I’ve heard something about him,” John said quickly. “I’ve been trying to remember what it was.”

“No doubt some piece of ludicrous gossip that we should pay no heed to,” Arthur warned. Listening to these words brought it all back to John. The story struck him so suddenly that he lifted a hand in the air and turned to look at his friend.

“Ah ...” he faltered.

“Ah, what?” Arthur asked.

“I’ve just remembered what I’ve heard about Lord Bolton.”

“And? What is it?” Emma encouraged, looking at him with expectation. Now he could remember the story, he knew why his gut instinct was to get Emma as far away from Lord Bolton as possible.

“A lawyer in town told me the Bolton dynasty has a tradition of their families arranging their marriages, keeping the wealth amongst themselves and marrying cousins and such,” John began slowly.

“Well, that is hardly unusual,” Arthur said with a frown. “From the agonized expression you’re wearing, I’m guessing there is something else to this story. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be gossip.”

“There is ...” John set his eyes on Emma. “They have a reputation for taking mistresses who are debutantes that often won’t be recognized in London.” He could see the

instant impact his words had had. Emma blanched, her lips parting in surprise. She fitted the description perfectly, for she spent her Seasons in Bath rather than London. He figured it was a good warning to her to stay away from Lord Bolton.

“What rubbish, John.” Arthur waved the idea away, making John snap his head back towards him.

“Rubbish?” John repeated in surprise. “That is their reputation.”

“I have met the man. I know him,” Arthur said pointedly. “You do not. I will neither entertain the conversation nor hear such gossip spread.”

“It’s not my intention to spread gossip, Arthur,” John said, holding his arms out in a helpless gesture. “You know me. How often do



I take part in such a thing? I'm merely repeating it to warn your sister of what I have heard. Gentlemen who offer dances to strangers we should be wary of. Especially if they all have Lord Bolton's reputation."

"I cannot believe you would say such a thing, Your Grace." Emma's words dragged John's gaze back to her. There was a redness to her cheeks, and her lips trembled slightly. It was a look of pure anger that he had seen years ago on her face when she was just a child.

"What?" he asked, confused by how he had offended her.

"Just because *you* may not understand why anyone would wish to dance with me, that gives you no reason to go round besmirching the name of partners that do want my favour. The insinuation that a gentleman would only ask me to dance because of ..." she broke off and turned her chin sharply to Arthur. "I have

had enough of your friend's company for one evening, Arthur. I'll be with Anne when you are ready to part for the night."

She walked off then, her words and actions so sudden that John stood there reeling, staring after her.

"Did she just –"

"Oh, yes." Arthur nodded, turning away to top up his punch glass. "I think you should go apologize, my friend. You clearly have offended her even more than I thought you had done."

John didn't need telling twice. He hurried after her.

She had managed to move quickly through the crowd and slipped between groups of guests so fast that he struggled to keep up with her. In the end, he had to cut around the other side of the dance floor, catching up with her just by the violins. He caught her wrist, urging her to turn back to him with her eyes wide in surprise.

“Lady Colbourne, allow me to explain.” He had to speak a little louder than normal for her to hear him above the animated string music.

“You don’t need to explain anything,” she said quickly, pulling her wrist out of his grasp. The moment it was gone, he wanted it back. Her skin had been warm beneath his touch.

“I must,” he said plainly. “It was not my intention to offend you or insult you in any way. It is merely that I wish to protect you from the kind of man I believe Lord Bolton to

be from the gossip I have heard. That is all. Can you blame me so much for that?"

"Blame you? Happily!" she said boldly, making him stand straight in surprise. "It might shock you to hear this, Your Grace, as you have given your opinion so readily, but I am actually not that interested in your opinion. Not remotely so. I do not invite your thoughts on who I dance with or who I speak to. You are not my brother." At her words, he bristled on his feet, moving from side to side.

"I never meant to say that I was. It's just ... we have grown up, side by side, and it's only natural that I wish to look out for you –"

"Why?" she asked, shaking her head. The question was left unanswered for a moment as silence stretched between them. John could feel the words on the tip of his tongue threatening to come out, the full confession that he actually thought far too highly of her

to imagine her dancing with any other man at all, let alone Lord Bolton. Yet the words died in his throat. Clearly, with the way she was looking at him now, she held him in contempt. Such a confession would not be welcome.

“We grew up together,” he said as though that explained everything.

“Right.” She nodded. “That we did, yet you have made it abundantly obvious to me not only from when I last saw you but this evening too that you’re not even remotely my friend. You have no wish to be.”

He was stunned. He opened his mouth to object, but she just carried on speaking.

“You have been cold, rude, and downright insulting. The only reason I can possibly think of you for trying to interfere with my life is to

protect my brother's reputation, as he is your friend."

"Lady Colbourne, please –"

"Look, even now, you can't call me by my name. You used to when we were children," she said, crossing her arms across her body.

"We are not children anymore."

"And we are evidently not friends either," she said sharply, backing away from him, just as the violin music behind them grew to a crescendo. "You have made that copiously clear, so I will make something clear for you too. Who I dance with is none of your business. It is only my own. Good evening, Your Grace." She bobbed a quick curtsy, refusing to look him in the eye again, and hurried off.

John didn't follow this time. He was too blindsided by her words and the fact that she thought he disliked her so much. He had never said as much; he'd just been distant to push her away. That was all. He covered his mouth in shock as his eyes traced her path through the rest of the ballroom.

She reached the other side of the room and hurried to a punch bowl to refill her glass. She kept her gaze on it for a minute, fiddling with the cup, until someone appeared at her side.

The appearance made John stiffen even more, for it was Lord Bolton. He moved to her side and must have said something charming, for Emma's face instantly slackened out of the scowl John had caused into a smile.

The more John watched, the sadder he

became, for Lord Bolton changed their positions so that his arm could bump against Emma's. It was all too intimate to watch.

John flicked his head away and marched back through the crowds, heading toward Arthur.

"Did you apologize to her?" Arthur asked, just as the violin music was ending.

"She didn't give me a chance." John shook his head. "She's talking to Lord Bolton again."

"Oh, well, I'm sure you'll have another chance. Why don't we head to the card room instead?" Arthur asked, only John stepped away.

"If you'd excuse me, I've had enough for one night," he said, struggling to explain himself,



just as Arthur frowned.

“You’re leaving already?”

“I am,” John said. “I’d say pass on my goodbye and well regards to your sister, but I don’t think she’d believe it.” He sighed. “Good evening, Arthur. I’ll see you soon.”

“Good evening. Try not to worry, though, John,” Arthur called after him, just as he began to retreat through the crowds. “She’ll forgive you in time.”

John wasn’t so convinced she would.

## Chapter 5

“You have been looking out of the window every five minutes since you have woken up. Who is it you are waiting for?” Emma asked as she looked over her teacup and along the breakfast table to where Arthur was leaning in his chair, trying to get a good look out of the window.

“Have I?” Arthur asked, sitting straight again. “Oh, I was just waiting on a letter from our mother.”

“Nice attempt, but not a competent one.” Emma laughed and held up an open piece of parchment.

“Oh,” Arthur sighed. “It already arrived.”

“That it did,” she said, nodding her head, “and you walked straight past it on the hallway table this morning to look out of the window, so I know it’s not what you’re after.”

“It was,” he lied again, only making Emma sigh and turn her attention back down to her breakfast plate. “What does our mother say in her letter?”

“She says she is enjoying staying with her cousin and that the sea air in Lyme Regis is doing her good. She also asks about the assembly two days ago and ...” Emma huffed when she read the last line. “She wishes to know how your attempt at marrying me off is going.”

In response, Arthur laughed warmly.

“You look so offended,” he said, shaking his head.

“I am offended!” Emma pointed out, dropping the letter back down to the table. “If even my own mother talks of marrying me off as though it is a matter of business, what hope do I have? Please tell me, Arthur, that is not how you see it? That you won’t accept a gentleman’s wish to marry me just because he is wealthy?”

“Hmm,” he screwed up his nose in thought.

“That ...” she paused and dropped her cup loudly in her saucer, the clink emphasizing her words, “was very much not the response I was hoping for.”

“I know it’s not business. In fact, John and I were discussing the same thing last night.”

“You were?” Emma asked in surprise, pausing with her food.

“In particular when it came to either he or I marrying. John felt quite fervently that one should marry someone they cared for, not just for the sake of a connection and producing an heir.” Arthur settled his gaze on his plate for a minute and began to play with his food. “It’s quite different to what our mother says.”

“I see our mother has got to you too.” She leaned forward on the table and rested her chin in her hands. “Is she insisting you get married?”

“Oh, yes.” Arthur nodded. “She sees it as my *duty*. Like you, though, I do not wish to marry

someone I do not care for,” he assured her, making her sit back and smile. “At the same time, though, you should know if you fall in love with someone like a candlestick maker, I’m unlikely to give him my blessing.”

“Why? Because he won’t have money?”

“Precisely, even if you would never run of candles.” His jest made her laugh heartily. “I need to make sure whoever you do marry can look after you.”

There was a sound of a carriage beyond the window, and Arthur jumped to his feet, rushing towards the glass.

“Good God, who is it you are waiting for with such eagerness?” she asked, returning to her food.

“Well, he’s here.”

“Who’s here?” she asked.

“John.”

“What?” She dropped her cutlery on her plate, making an awful clatter that caused Arthur to turn and look back at her. “Why on earth is he here?”

“I invited him to stay.”

“No, you can’t do that.” Emma was on her feet and rushing towards his place by the window, breathing heavily as her eyes fell on the crescent’s curving road. At the bottom of the

steps that led to their front door, a carriage had pulled up, and John was climbing down. Emma tried to ignore the jolt in her stomach at seeing his black hair and blue eyes turning up to the sunny sky.

“Why can’t he stay? Just because you two have had an argument?” Arthur’s words made her look round at her brother with her hands on her hips. “Don’t look at me like that. He’s practically my brother.”

“And I am your sister. You should be taking my side.”

“If you two have an argument, then you can sort it out amongst yourselves.” He held his hands up in surrender. “I’m certainly not going to get involved. In fact, John staying here for a few days will certainly give you both the opportunity to make up with one another.”



“A few days?” she repeated in surprise, following her brother around the table as he returned to his seat. “That’s not why you invited him, is it?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Look, John doesn’t have a house in town at the moment. He was staying in some lodging near Royal Victoria Park. It seemed absurd for him to stay there all the time when he can come and stay with us. Travelling back to the estate on the other side of Somerset is certainly too far to go every day.”

Emma didn’t know what to say. Tongue-tied, she stood perfectly still as she heard the doors open in the entrance hall, admitting John to the house.

“With that settled,” Arthur ate the last chunk of bread on his plate and turned to the door.

“I’m going to go and greet our guest.” He placed a hand on the door handle before hesitating and turning back to look at her. “Now, will you join me in welcoming our guest? Or will you defy propriety and ignore him.”

“After his comments the other night at the assembly, no one would blame me for ignoring him,” Emma said tiredly, throwing her hands up to the sky in dismay. “I can’t believe you invited him here and didn’t tell me.”

“Well,” he said smiling, “it’s much easier to have this argument with you when you can no longer do anything about stopping it.” He opened the door with a triumphant wave in her direction before walking out.

Emma stared after him for a minute, part of her fully intending to escape to the garden and avoid seeing John again. In the end, her sense of propriety won out. Just because John could

be insulting and rude didn't mean she had to be as well. She would greet him cordially and then avoid him as much as she could.

She turned to the mirror to check her appearance, finding herself fussing with the loose locks of her hair, undecided whether to push them back behind her ears or leave them hanging down.

*Which would John like?*

She growled aloud when she realized what she was doing and pushed away from the mirror, walking towards the entrance hall.

The hall was long and slim, patterned with grey and white diamond tiles that led to a spiralling staircase on the far side of the room. Beyond the staircase was a window that stretched over two floors, flooding the space

with light.

As Emma stepped into the hall, this breadth of light shone across John's position, showing him shaking Arthur's hand as the butler and footman began to collect his bags and carry them towards the stairs.

"We're delighted you could stay, aren't we, Emma?" Arthur asked, turning back to look at her with mischief in his eyes.

"It is not the word I would have chosen," she muttered as she walked forward. "You are very welcome, Your Grace." She curtsied to him, being as formal as she possibly could. "Do let me know if there is anything you need during your stay. I can arrange anything you need with our housekeeper."

"Thank you," he said with just as much

reserve.

“Well, after that awkward encounter,” Arthur said, breaking the tension. “Let me show you to your chamber, John.” Arthur led John away towards the stairs. Despite Emma’s determination to run and hide, her feet stayed exactly where they were. She turned her body to follow the men’s path up the stairs. When they were halfway up, John looked over his shoulder back down at her. They stared at one another, just for a beat before John turned away and continued up the stairs.

The moment he was out of view, Emma turned sharply away and hurried to the nearest exit towards the garden, dismayed that it didn’t seem to matter how annoyed at John she was; there was still this longing for him.

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“Arthur, your library is looking rather thin,” John said as he walked up and down the shelves. They had just finished dinner and retired to the library for reading. What John feared would be an uncomfortable affair had proved to be just so. Though he could relax easily into conversation with Arthur, Emma stayed quiet for most of dinner, only speaking when she was directly spoken to, which was so unlike her.

Now, Emma sat in the far corner of the room with a pile of books beside her and one she currently had her nose bent towards in her grasp. Arthur was sat at a table nearby with a candle beside him, infinitely preferring to give his attention to a game of solitaire with cards than read.

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked, looking up from the cards.

“I mean there is barely anything here,” John said again, turning to the empty shelves. “I could have sworn you used to have some interesting history books on this shelf.” He stood up on a footstool and gestured to a shelf that was now completely empty. “Have you sold them all?”

“No.” Arthur shook his head. “I suppose you could say they have been stolen.”

“By who?” John looked around in shock, nearly falling off the footstool.

“By my sister.” Arthur pointed towards the corner where Emma looked innocently up from the book in her lap.

“Well, you are hardly interested in them, are you, Arthur?” she said as she gestured to the pile beside her. “I spend two minutes talking

about the Tudors or Queen Elizabeth, even Shakespeare and his contemporaries and –” she broke off sharply just as Arthur made a loud snoring sound. John had to restrain his laughter as he watched Arthur pretend to wake up from slumber. “See? That’s my point,” Emma said, shaking her head. “At least I appreciate these books.”

“Is this all of them?” John asked, stepping down from the stool and moving towards her side.

“Some are in my chamber. These are the rest,” she gestured to the pile.

“No, they’re not,” Arthur called up from the other side of the room. “You’ll find books discarded around the house. The other day I nearly tripped on a historian’s account of the War of the Roses on the staircase. I could have broken my neck.”



“I forget where I leave them,” Emma said, turning her head back down to the book.

“Lady Colbourne ...” John took a chair near to Emma, knowing that things were going to have to change between them sooner or later. “May I borrow one of your books?” She looked up, with her eyes wide as though startled he’d spoken to her at all.

“It depends on which one,” she said, betraying a small smile. “Which would you like?”

He leaned forward and peered at the selection beside her. She had chosen mostly historian’s tales, along with a few Shakespearean comedies and Jacobean tragedies thrown in. It was plain to see the Tudor period was her favourite.

“How about this one?” He gestured to one near the bottom. It was a biography of Queen Elizabeth’s life.

“Very well.” She retrieved the book from her pile and passed it towards him. “But please don’t lose my page. I’m enjoying learning more about Queen Elizabeth.”

“I promise, I won’t,” he assured, taking the book from her hands. With the movement, his fingers brushed against hers. He had to tamp down on his wish to hold that touch for a beat longer.

“Queen Elizabeth?” Arthur asked from the other side of the room. “Do you not find that boring, John?”

“Not remotely,” John said, turning the cover

to open the pages. “Why do you?” he asked.

“Well, it was just so long ago. Why is it relevant now?”

“Hang on,” John turned in his seat, looking towards Arthur. “You don’t think the way our monarchy has been run in the past is relevant to the way our monarchy is now?” he asked with triumph when Arthur couldn’t find an answer and just shrugged his shoulders. “What about the fact that it’s fascinating to see at a time where the country was divided between religion, constantly veering back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism, that one queen managed to bring together a peaceful country? How about the fact that she’s our longest-reigning monarch? None of that interests you?”

Arthur pretended to snore again, making the three of them laugh.

“You’re hopeless, Arthur.” John turned away again, looking at the book.

“If you wish to talk about Queen Elizabeth with someone, then you’re sat next to the best person for that,” Arthur pointed out.

These simple words made John look up to Emma, surprised to see she was staring at him with her lips parted slightly.

“You are fond of her?” he asked, eager to have a conversation with her where they wouldn’t end in an argument.

“I think she’s fascinating.” Emma nodded. “She went from being held in the Tower of London, convinced she was about to die because of an order her own half-sister gave,

to ruling the country for over forty years. Not many people can turn a death sentence into a life of success.”

“Agreed,” John nodded in thought. “What do you think her success was in part due to?”

“Many things.” Emma suddenly discarded the book in her lap and moved forward to the edge of the chair. “Her education, for part of it, but also her determination never to marry.” Seeing the passion and interest with which she spoke made John lean forward too, the better to talk with her.

“Do you think so?” he asked, intrigued by the idea.

“Well, even though she dallied with the idea of marrying when she was younger, she never did. Her sister married before her when she

was queen, and that led to a country where two rulers were trying to rule. It was argumentative and led to a divided country. Elizabeth only had her own mind to please. No man.”

“You sound as if you admire her?” John smiled, watching Emma closely.

“I do,” she said, nodding.

“Why?” he pushed further.

“She was queen and sole monarch in a world dominated by men, Your Grace. What woman wouldn’t admire that?”

His smile grew even wider at the idea.

“Of either sex, who wouldn’t admire that?” he confessed, seeing that she smiled too.

“I am sorry for prattling on,” she said, hanging her head a little. “My brother tells me I bore people when I do.”

“You never need to apologize for that,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s a subject I find as interesting as you do.” He waited for her to return his gaze. When she eventually did, he offered her another smile that she returned.

A barrier came down between them. It might not have been the apology and make-up that John had pictured making, but it would do. At least now, they were able to move on and talk of other things together.

As they both returned their attentions to their books, he found himself constantly returning to their conversation. Often, he would put down his book and ask her opinion on either of the books they were reading, drawing her into more and more passionate conversation, to the point that Arthur really did fall asleep across the room from them in his armchair.

“I didn’t think it was actually possible to bore someone to sleep.” Emma smiled, gesturing to her brother. John had to stifle his laugh.

“I was hardly bored,” he acknowledged before looking back at Emma. Seeing her play with the book in his hand, he figured with Arthur asleep, this was the best opportunity he’d get to make things completely settled between them without Arthur’s comments. “Emma, about the assembly.”

“Maybe it’s best we don’t talk about it,” she said, keeping her gaze down on her book.



“I just want you to know something,” he said softly. “I never meant to offend you,” he added firmly. “If I did, then I can only apologize a thousand times for it. But it was never my intention.”

This time, she looked up, returning his gaze again.

“Apology accepted.” She nodded.

Seeing how closely they were sat together with the only other person in the room fast asleep, John was tempted to reach out and take her hand. He could do it easily enough, yet his hand stayed where it was. Despite the enjoyable evening they’d had together, both talking of a topic they loved, he had seen well enough at the assembly that she did not think very highly of him. For him to do something

so forward would not be welcome.

“I think I’ll retire for the night.” He cleared his throat and jumped to his feet. “If you will excuse me.” He bowed to her, attempting a formal-like manner again. “Good night, Lady Colbourne.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she said, nodding her head to him. As he walked away from the room, he thought he heard sadness in her voice, but then he brushed it out of his mind, thinking it was just his imagination at work.

## Chapter 6

Emma was even more confused now than she had been before. John had been staying in their house for two days, and ever since the evening they had talked about history and he had apologized to her, once again he had retreated from her. Now whenever she bumped into him around the house, he was cold.

“It’s not just me, is it?” Emma asked as she marched up and down Arthur’s study. “Tell me you see it too.”

“I don’t know, Em,” her brother said, using his usual nickname for her. One he only ever used when they were away from listening ears. Arthur looked up from the paperwork he had been reading concerning the dukedom estate in the countryside and looked her in the eye.

“If you’re so put out about his behaviour, why don’t you just ask him what is wrong?”

“Oh yes, that wouldn’t be awkward at all. Excuse me, Your Grace, but why do you seem to blow so warm and cold all the time? Some days you’re perfectly pleasant, and other times, you’re odious company. Sure, that will go down well,” she said with sarcasm, earning just a roll of Arthur’s eyes in response.

The bell for the front door rang, earning both of their attention.

“Is that your friend Miss Braithwaite?” he asked in nonchalance.

“No.” Emma turned to the clock. “She’s not due until this afternoon. Are you expecting anyone?”

“No.” Arthur put down the papers entirely and stood to his feet. “I suppose we should go and greet our surprise guest then.”

Emma led the way into the entrance hall with Arthur close behind her, not prepared for the person who walked through the front door. They were carrying a bunch of white roses in their hand, and when they moved the bouquet to the side, it revealed the face of Lord Burton.

“Oh,” Emma stopped walking suddenly, stunned as he passed his top hat to the butler and began to walk towards her, proffering the flowers.

“Your Grace.” He nodded his head to her brother before turning his eyes back to her. “Lady Colbourne. I hope you will forgive my presumptuousness, but I found I couldn’t wait until the next event of the Season to see you

again, so I resolved to come and see you myself.” He bowed deeply to her, offering one of those lopsided smiles that really could be quite charming.

“How kind, My Lord.” Emma took the flowers and inhaled the scent. It was sweet and reminded her of summer. “Please, come in and take some tea.” She gestured to the nearest door, aware that Arthur followed too, clearly intent on chaperoning them both.

There was a little bustle as the housekeeper arranged for a vase for Emma’s flowers, and tea was brought in by the butler. As Emma and Lord Burton went to take a seat on the rococo settee set by the tall windows overlooking the rear garden, Arthur hesitated in the middle of the room. Before Emma could ask what he was doing, he dived to the door and seemed to be speaking to someone.

A moment later, Arthur was not the only one

walking into the room, for he had John at his side.

“Lord Burton, good to see you again,” John said in his usual cold manner.

“Oh.” Lord Burton looked surprised for a moment. “Oh yes, we met the other night at the assembly. Forgive me, Your Grace, I am bad with remembering a face, and I was somewhat distracted the other night.” In emphasis to his words, he cast a glance Emma’s way. She smiled, amazed by the warmth his attentions created inside her. It did not miss her notice, though, how Arthur and John exchanged glances with raised eyebrows, practically mocking him.

She was rather pleased when they took their seats a little distance away and left her in peace to talk with Lord Burton.

They exchanged a few polite words for a minute, but Emma only grew disappointed that there was no real fervour in his conversation. Instead, he seemed to rely on flirting with the usual statements, talking of how he preferred dancing with her to every other lady he danced with at the assembly the other night. Though she was warmed by his comments, they didn't matter to her a great deal.

“While I look forward to attending the concert and seeing you there, Lady Colbourne, I must confess a wish to see you sooner,” he whispered to her, prompting her to lean in towards him, the better to hear him.

“Ah-em,” when Arthur cleared his throat across the room, she sat straight again and sent him a narrowed glare.

“Something stuck in your throat, Arthur?” she



asked pointedly, showing she did not appreciate the interruption.

“Just a little something,” he said nonchalantly before turning back to look at John and entering into their conversation once again.

“So, My Lady,” Lord Burton said, his voice eager. “What would you say to us arranging our little outing to Glastonbury Abbey, then? I am eager to see it.”

“That’s wonderful.” Emma had wanted to see it again for some time. “I recently read a book on the history of the place and how the legend of King Arthur is connected.” She trailed off, coming to a stop when she could see Lord Burton was not particularly interested in what she had to say. Despite herself, she looked across the room towards John, knowing that he would have taken an interest in what she had said. “When did you wish to go?”

“How about Saturday? In three days’ time?” he asked, clearly still eager as he leaned forward a little more. Their hands were within touching distance now. He even stretched out one hand as though he intended to brush her fingers with his own. She waited with bated breath, wondering if it would give her the same feeling as when John had touched her hand, taking the book from her grasp the other night.

She didn’t find out. Before Lord Burton could touch her hand, across the room, there was a clatter and a smash of china.

She pulled her hand out of reach and snapped her head around at the sudden sound, turning to see John had dropped his saucer on the floor, and it had smashed into smithereens.

“I am so sorry, Arthur,” John was saying

quickly, going down on his knees to pick up the pieces.

“Think nothing of it,” Arthur said, making a move to retrieve the fragments himself. “You looked rather distracted.” There was something in Arthur’s voice that Emma did not recognize. She did, however, see how John sent him an angry glare. Arthur had to be causing trouble in their conversation.

Turning her attention back to Lord Burton, “Saturday sounds perfect,” she said with a smile. “I would like my brother to come too, if he may.” She said it with the intention of her brother being their chaperone, but as soon as the words came out, she realized just how true they were. She may have liked Lord Burton, and she was intrigued by him, but she didn’t like the idea of being alone with him just yet, even if she had a maid to chaperone.

“What is it I am coming to?” Arthur asked

from across the room as he stood with pieces of crockery in his hand.

“A trip to Glastonbury Abbey, Your Grace,” Lord Burton said, sitting back with a smile. “I have just invited Lady Colbourne to come with me to see the place on Saturday.”

As John stood up, he nearly dropped another piece of crockery. Emma momentarily frowned as she looked at him, wondering why he had suddenly become so clumsy.

“Of course,” Arthur said. “It sounds like a fun outing. John, you will come too, won’t you?”

“Will I?” John looked around with his mouth open in surprise.

“Well, if these two are going to be off talking to each other all day, then I want someone to talk too as well,” Arthur said to which John nodded, without making a sound.

“Excellent, then it’s a plan.” Lord Burton stood to his feet. “I would wish to stay longer, My Lady, but unfortunately, arrangements with my uncle call me away. Until Saturday then?”

“Until Saturday?” Emma joined him on her feet. As she went to curtsy, Lord Burton took her hand. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the back.

Emma tried not to think of how John and Arthur were watching from the other side of the room; she tried only to think of the sensation. She supposed she was too distracted because it didn’t excite her very much.

“Good day,” he bowed to her, then turned to the other two and offered another goodbye. Once he was gone, Emma looked their way, seeing Arthur frowning and John still picking up pieces of broken china.

“What exactly happened over there?” she asked, crossing her arms and watching them both carefully.

“Nothing,” John said boldly, jumping to his feet again.

“Yes, nothing,” Arthur said, his gaze on the doorway through which Lord Burton had just left. Emma couldn’t help feeling that they weren’t telling her something.

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Emma could not settle herself. She had been wandering around the house all day in the hope of burning off some of her excitement about the following day, but it did little good. It was Friday already, and just one more day to go until her trip to Glastonbury Abbey. She had wanted to burn off some energy by wandering in the garden, but with heavy rain beyond the windows, that was not an option.

Instead, she found herself wandering into the library where Arthur and John were set up looking over a table together, both of them staring intently at paperwork.

“It won’t work.” Arthur shook his head.

“Trust me, it will,” John said firmly. “I’ve done the research, and I’m confident in it. This is what is right for my estate.”

“You two sound very serious,” Emma commented as she walked past them, looking towards the window, beyond which it was still raining heavily.

“Is that rare for us?” Arthur asked with evident humour in his voice.

“Extremely so!” She laughed. “You rarely talk business.”

“You seem to forget we went to university together,” Arthur said. “We spent a long time talking about serious things; we just prefer to talk about fun things. That is all.”

“Then, what is it you are speaking of now?” she asked, looking away from the window in desperate need of a distraction from her excitement. Tomorrow when she was out with



Lord Burton, she was certain she'd finally get an answer to whether she could really like Lord Burton or not. In such a dramatic and romantic location as Glastonbury Abbey, who couldn't help being swept up in the atmosphere?

"Sadly, business," Arthur admitted as he took out a chair and slumped down. "We're talking about the tenants on John's estate."

"What about them?" Emma asked, moving back towards the table and looking at the paperwork stretched out in front of them. There were maps and plans, with charts too, on top of which was a small sketch of a building.

"I wish to set up a school for the tenants' children," John said clearly. Emma darted her gaze back to his, surprised by the declaration.

“You do?”

“So many of them do not even have the chance of an education,” he said with a shrug, his voice and body suddenly enthralled in passion on the subject. “Some of these children start working under the age of ten. When the groundskeeper brought his nine-year-old son to work, saying he wished to teach him the craft, I just snapped.” He shook his head. “A boy that old should still be in education, and he certainly should be enjoying his childhood. Not working on my estate.”

He leaned forward and moved some of the papers around, pointing out things to her.

“These are the plans for an old cottage on the estate. It used to belong to a watermill long disused. Do you remember it?” he asked, looking at her. When his eyes found hers, she saw some of the passion slip out of him. He

took half a step away from her as though reaching for his usual cold and aloof manner.

“I do remember it,” she said, dragging the drawing towards her for a better look. “We played in there when we were children.”

“We did.” Arthur nodded. “John has drawn up plans to convert it into a school.”

“For how many children?” she asked.

“All the tenants’ children and all the ones in the surrounding village,” John answered, handing over another piece of paper with children’s names and ages listed on the top. “I can pay for the renovations and then the teacher too. It gives the children the education they deserve, and there will be fewer children going to work up at the cotton mills in Exeter and Bristol.” He shook his head.

Emma held onto the list of names for a minute, her eyes quickly wandering down each name in turn before she returned her gaze to John.

“What do you think?” he asked, almost nervously as he shifted between his legs.

“I think it is an incredibly kind thing to do.” She smiled at him, momentarily forgetting her anger at him for this constant hot and cold behaviour and just thinking of this one action. “Not many landowners would be willing to do this.”

“I question whether enough children will go.” Arthur sighed. “It’s a sad fact that many parents send their children to work so young because they can’t afford to feed them without it.”

“I wish that weren’t the case,” John harrumphed and sat down in a nearby chair, flicking his head backward.

“Well, to counteract that, I have an idea ...” Emma paused, counting up the names once more. There really weren’t that many names on the list.

“Which is?” John turned his gaze back to her.

“What if you provided lunch as part of the day? Nothing too elaborate; just some simple food at lunchtime,” she said with a shrug. “More parents would be inclined to send their children to the school then because they’ll know there’s a good meal in it for them too.”

Emma assumed she had said something wrong because both John and Arthur just stared at her for a minute, neither one of them making a sound.

“Well,” Arthur leaned forward, resting his head on the table. “I told you she had a good head on her shoulders.”

John laughed warmly and nodded.

“Thank you, Lady Colbourne,” he said with his smile growing wide. “You may have just saved my plan for the school.”

She smiled too, pleased with herself, and sat down to help with the rest of the plans. The entire time, John did not retreat from her again. He just sat beside her, with the two of them writing up notes, and when their arms bumped together, and they accidentally

reached for the same quill, there was no awkwardness about the mistaken touches. They only made Emma's cheeks heat and look away from him. For she knew it would only be a matter of time again before he withdrew from her, and the icy version of John returned.

## Chapter 7

“You nearly ready, John?” Arthur asked as he strode past him towards the front door.

“All set,” John said, trying to hold back his anger at having to accompany them on this trip. Instead, he set out following Arthur outside towards the carriage that awaited them. Beside the carriage was John’s own horse, for he wished to ride there himself. Being trapped in close quarters in a carriage with Emma for so long, he had a feeling would be too trying on his nerves. At least this way, he had distance. “Arthur, I need to speak with you about something.”

“Oh? Speak then,” Arthur encouraged with a wave of his hand as he watched a picnic basket being strapped onto the back of the carriage.



John cleared his throat, buying a little time in how to structure his thoughts. Something had happened to him last night. There had been a moment when working alongside Emma with the new school plans he had realized how far his liking for her had gone beyond just fascination or even admiration.

It wasn't just that she was beautiful or pleasant in conversation, though she was, but she had other admirable qualities too. Her intelligence, her interest in the past, and her capability made them both compatible, and they made her a fine choice for a duchess. Seeing the fervour with which she had become involved with his scheme, helping develop the plans, he'd had a brief glimpse of what life could be like if he married Emma.

Together, they could look after the estate and their tenants well. He could just imagine how involved Emma would get with the school,

too, and looking out for the tenants' families. With all the ideas she had that evening, he didn't doubt that she could be the person to really make it something special on his estate.

There was just one problem with this perfect picture. She would never welcome an advance from him.

When John had woken up that morning, something had clicked inside him. If he wished to slowly change Emma's opinion of him and create a future where this happy marriage was possible, then he needed to buy himself some time.

Time that was threatened while Lord Burton was around.

"John?" Arthur waved in front of his face, bringing him back to the moment. "What is it

you wished to speak of?”

“This Lord Burton.” John lowered his voice and stepped towards Arthur, who folded his arms straight away, clearly guarded about the discussion.

“Didn’t we have this conversation the other day when he arrived to visit my sister?” he asked. “I admit, his charm is a bit ... too much at times,” he admitted with a pretend shudder, “but my sister seems to like him; he is a good man, and they’d make a very eligible match. I am hardly going to dissuade that, am I?”

“I just think you should be wary of this man before you know the facts,” John said, lowering his voice further.

“Facts like the gossip you heard, you mean. Oh yes, clearly that was based on fact,” Arthur

said with thick sarcasm. “You can’t seriously expect me to interfere with Emma’s happiness because you heard something once that could all be a pack of lies.”

“I’m not saying it’s true or that it’s a lie.” John looked back, wary that footsteps were nearby. Emma was walking out of the house now, getting closer. “All I think is that we should ask more about this man before he and your sister become too close.”

“Hmm, I bet that’s what you think,” Arthur said with a small smirk.

“What does that mean?” John asked.

“Nothing,” Arthur said with a kind of innocence. “I’m just starting to wonder why you are so bothered about who my sister marries.”

John baulked; he opened his mouth ready to argue, but found himself tongue-tied.

“Everyone ready?” Emma asked, appearing at their side.

“All set,” Arthur assured, just as John turned his gaze on Emma. She was wearing a Pomona green gown that contrasted her dark auburn hair brilliantly. The light pelisse she had thrown over her shoulders too complemented her skin, bringing into focus the alabaster complexion.

“Your Grace?” Emma turned to look at him, prompting him to close his mouth and stop himself from admiring her.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I’ve prepared my horse to ride alongside.”

“Oh, I see,” she said and turned away, heading towards the carriage and climbing inside quickly. The dismissal was so abrupt that John just stared after her.

“What did I do now?” he asked, looking back to Arthur.

“It might have something to do with the fact you’re refusing to ride in a carriage with her,” Arthur whispered in her ear. “Yet again.”

“Again?” John said in a panic, not realizing his attempts to evade her had been so easily noticed in the past.

“Oh yes,” Arthur nodded. “Once or twice in the past, I thought you just didn’t like Emma very much.” He revealed a mischievous smile. “I have a theory. I was very wrong about that. Care to comment?”

“No.” John walked away before Arthur could say any more. Even though he could hear Arthur chuckling, he focused on reaching the horse and climbing up as quickly as possible. He set off so fast that he rode ahead of the carriage, urging it to follow at his horse’s heels.

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When they arrived at the ruins, Emma felt breathless at the sight. Tall and imposing, scattered around the site in towers of yellow and golden stone, it was a place that felt almost magical. She was eager to be amongst the ruins and almost disappointed when Arthur pointed out they had to wait for Lord

Burton to arrive first.

She stood impatiently by the entrance gate, bobbing on her toes, eager to be in. When Lord Burton did arrive, he quickly took her hand and looped it through his arm. She barely noticed for she was too busy staring at the abbey.

“It is even more breathtaking than I remember,” she marvelled as the two of them wandered through what had once been the high altar and the cloisters. All that remained were tall walls that towered overhead, with roofs missing and spaces where stained-glass windows used to be.

“I have an equally breathtaking sight on my arm.” Lord Burton’s flirtation missed the mark. She was there to see the ruins and disentangled herself from his arm to take a better look at the yellow-stone ruins.



As she wandered down the carcass of what was once the main chapel, she remembered what she had read about the place in one of her books.

“It’s said that the first church on this site was built by followers of Christ himself who came here in the first century.” She smiled as she looked around the stones. “Of course, no one knows for sure. But we have records to show there was a structure here after the Normans landed in the eleventh century ...”

Halfway through the speech, Emma was aware Lord Burton was not listening. She broke off and turned to look at him. She had been happily chatting about what interested her so much about the site and had hoped he would be interested too. Clearly, she was wrong. He offered her a smile and was charming with it, but still, the smile caused little warmth inside her.

Emma's mind was made up. A charmer Lord Burton might be and a perfectly nice man, yet he still couldn't surpass the care and fondness that she had for a man standing on the other side of the ruins.

Her gaze slipped towards where John and Arthur stood. They were walking around the site where King Arthur was supposedly buried, making mock comments about Arthur having risen thanks to her brother sharing the same name. They seemed to be having an infinitely more amusing time than she was, and she longed to be by their side.

Before she could even think about crossing the distance, she found Lord Burton walking past her, placing a hand to her lower back. The touch startled her so much she darted her head towards his.

“Shall we go this way?” he asked, using his hand on her back to lead her further into the cloisters section, away from John’s and Arthur’s view. She nodded and went with him, knowing it would be rude to refuse. “After today, I’d like to make a proposition.”

“A proposition?” she repeated in surprise, just as he offered a hand to help her step over some old broken stone steps that were now just a pile of rubble. She took the hand as it was a gentlemanly offering, aware that as she stepped the other side, he didn’t remove his hand from hers straight away. It took a minute for her to find a reason to extricate her hand, pretending to explore some of the exposed stonework nearby.

“After this, I do not wish you to call me Lord Burton, anymore.”

“Oh? Why not?” she asked, turning around to find herself surprisingly enclosed in stones

with him, relatively unchaperoned. She wrapped her pelisse around her shoulders, covering herself up a little.

“Because I wish to you to call me Anthony,” he explained, leaning beside her on a wall so that their shoulders and arms were touching, “and I will call you Emma.” He smiled before stepping away again. “Now, Emma. The concert next week. What do you say to us arriving together? I could arrange for my carriage to come and collect you before the event.”

“I ...” she faltered and walked after him as he continued to wander through the cloisters. She supposed she should have liked that he wanted to call her Emma, but he hadn’t actually asked if she would mind.

*The nerve! The outrageous confidence.*

“What do you say?” he asked, turning back around to her and offering another of those touches to her lower back, steering her through the ruins.

Her mouth felt dry. She tried to persuade herself that this was right. That the nerves she felt were all part of love’s first exciting tremors.

“I ... don’t know,” she said quickly, “perhaps we should ask my brother, as I know he intends to attend the concert as well.”

“Well, at the very least, we will attend Sir Gregory’s ball together,” he smiled, then circled a stone stack. As he digressed, talking of what he knew about Sir Gregory, she stared after him, her eyes wide in amazement that he had already presumed she would attend with him.

*Is this ... a courtship?*

She didn't know what to think of the idea. In fact, all she felt was being kind of lost. It made her want to run out of this part of the ruins and rush back to Arthur and, in particular, to John.

“After that, we'll have to make arrangements for the other events too.”

“Will we?” she asked, stepping out of the cloisters. Before she could get very far, Lord Burton was in front of her, blocking her path.

“I'd like that, wouldn't you?” he asked. She felt lonely in his company. When Lord Burton leaned towards her as though he were about to kiss her, she retreated, stumbling back so

much that she nearly fell over.

“I think it best we return to my brother now,” she said quickly, choosing another path through the ruins to take. She heard Lord Burton hurrying after her, but she didn’t look back for some time. She just wanted to be nearer to Arthur and John again.

*He actually tried to kiss me!*

All she could think of was the scandal it would have caused.

## Chapter 8

“I wonder if there is actually anyone buried down there,” Arthur said, pointing with his feet down to the supposed grave of King Arthur. “What do you reckon?”

John couldn't have cared less right now. He was staring past Arthur's shoulder, toward where Emma and Lord Burton had just appeared from outside the cloisters.

At first, Emma seemed to be walking away, but Lord Burton blocked her path, standing square in front of her so she couldn't get around him. It was what happened next that left John so infuriated. Lord Burton leaned towards Emma as though intent on kissing her.



“John?” A hand appeared in front of his face. John looked round to see Arthur trying to get his attention. “Something wrong?”

“No,” he said quickly, darting his gaze back to where Emma stood. She was walking away once again, and he hadn’t seen if she had allowed Lord Burton to kiss her or not.

*Surely Emma would not allow such a scandal?*

It was impossible to tell, for he had looked away to Arthur at the very moment that she would have either escaped Lord Burton or allowed a kiss. John suddenly felt sick at the very idea.

“You sure you’re all right?” Arthur asked, walking around him.

“Yes, I’m fine, it’s just that ...” he faltered, his mind working quickly. What he knew for certain was that he couldn’t stay here anymore. He had to leave these ruins, now; this very minute, he had to be gone. He couldn’t spend the whole day and a picnic watching Lord Burton as he flirted with Emma and see her encourage his attentions. It was too painful. He also couldn’t bear the idea of going back to stay at their house to listen to Emma talk about what a wonderful day she’d had in Lord Burton’s company. “I’ve just thought of some business that needs attending to. That’s all.”

“Business?” Arthur’s brow furrowed in confusion. “You’re here –” he gestured to the ruins around them, “– and yet you’re thinking of business?”

“Yes.” John nodded, clearing his throat now he’d made up his mind. He had to flee. “I just remembered that the architect I arranged to

rebuild the mill into a school is due at the estate first thing tomorrow morning. If I am going to be there in time, then I will have to leave now, so I will be ready for tomorrow.”

“What?” Arthur asked, his voice full of surprise. “John, you’re not seriously going to leave now in the middle of an outing.”

“I am afraid I must. I am sorry, Arthur.” John clapped his friend’s shoulder and began to walk towards the gate at the exit, but Arthur wouldn’t let it go that easily and hurried alongside him.

“How long will you be home for?” Arthur asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Not the entire Season, surely?” he pressed the matter. “Just see your architect and then come back to Bath. We have all the events of the Season to attend, and you know you’re more than welcome to spend the whole time at my house.”

“Thank you.” John nodded to him. “But I am not sure how long the business with the school will take.”

“Does that mean weeks or days?” Arthur asked just as they reached the gate. Seeing the disappointment in his friend’s eyes, John couldn’t let him down.

“Just a few days,” John assured him. That should be enough for him to gather himself and stop thinking of Emma, surely? Clearly, now his hope at delaying her possible courtship with Lord Burton was impossible. That had already begun. “I’ll write to you and

let you know when I intend to return.”

“Very well,” Arthur looked disappointed as he leaned on the gate.

“You don’t need to look so sad at my parting.”

“Don’t I?” Arthur sighed. “You’re the best company there is in all these balls.” He looked back across the ruins, drawing John’s gaze to follow where Emma and Lord Burton had gone. She was in the very centre now, where they had just stood a few minutes before, looking back and forth as though she had lost them and hadn’t seen which way they had gone.

“You have Lord Burton,” John said, earning a laugh from Arthur.

“He’s a good man, yes, but he’s not as good company as you.”

*Hmm, some good man.*

John scoffed at the very idea. To his mind, a good man wouldn’t try to kiss a lady without some official courtship or understanding in place. It was bold indeed.

“Well, the best of luck with your business and return to ours soon.” Arthur extended his hand over the gate, and John shook it. “Any goodbye you’d like me to give Emma?”

“Yes,” John faltered, not knowing what words to go for. “Just tell her I said goodbye, and I’ll see her soon.”

“Really?” Arthur lifted one eyebrow.

“What?” he asked.

“That’s all you want to say?” Arthur shook his head. “Tell me if I’m imagining things here, John, but I have a feeling you want to say a lot more to my sister than just that.”

John didn’t like being caught out in such a way.

“You’re imagining things,” he said with a shrug. “Even if you weren’t,” he said, gesturing to the ruins, “I think your sister is courting Lord Burton now.”

“It’s not a courtship yet.” Arthur shook his

head.

“Isn’t it?” John pointed out Emma’s current position, with Lord Burton pulling on her hand and drawing her into his arm. Arthur started forward as though desiring to stop the moment. It gave John the brief moment he needed, and he hurried off, heading towards his horse to leave.

This was good he persuaded himself. If he had no chance with Emma anyway, then the least he could do was try to save himself from the heartbreak of seeing her courting Lord Burton so openly.

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Emma saw Arthur first. She hurried towards him, extricating her hand from Lord Burton’s just as Arthur walked towards her. They met



in the middle of the open green beside a low ruined wall, just as the sound of a horse's hooves could be heard nearby.

“Arthur, where's John?” she asked. Before Arthur could even answer, a horse flew by the gate beyond, giving her a perfect view of just where John was. “Where is he going?”

“Back to his estate,” he explained.

“What?” she asked, startled just as Lord Burton caught up with her and reached her side. “Why?”

“He said there is business for him to attend to with the school,” he explained. “He's going to spend a few days at the estate before joining us back in Bath.”

“That’s so sudden,” she said, shifting between her feet. She couldn’t understand if there was something so urgent to attend to with the new school, why he wouldn’t have mentioned it the night before? It would have made sense for him to do so. “Did he say anything?”

“He just said goodbye and that he would see us in a few days.” Arthur shrugged.

“Right.” Emma nodded, trying to summon a smile and struggling to do it. She had been desperate to reach John’s side, certain she would feel safe there. With him gone, Lord Burton was standing too close to her side for real comfort.

“Shall we continue, Emma?” Lord Burton asked, offering his arm to her again. She didn’t miss how his use of her first name made her brother’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“I’ll join you for a bit, if I may.” Arthur took her arm before Lord Burton could, much to her relief. She clung onto his arm, and they walked through the ruins for a bit longer, with Lord Burton on Arthur’s other side making conversation. “You should have heard what John had to say, Emma,” Arthur said as they reached the far end of the ruins. “He was talking at length about the first buildings on this site and what has changed since. Including the dissolution of the monasteries and when the abbey was sacked.”

“He was?” she asked, startled by how similar some of what John wished to speak of was what she wanted to speak of as well.

“Something tells me you would have enjoyed the conversation infinitely more than I did.” At his words, she laughed. She was tempted to admit that she would have preferred it to the conversation she’d been having with Lord Burton, but that would have been far too rude.

Instead, she clung onto Arthur as they walked around the rest of the ruins, pleased that Lord Burton no longer had the chance to be so forward with her. With each step she took, she found herself imagining what the day could have been like had she attended just with John instead.

Would he have been animated and speaking of the past with her? Would he smile and be warm with her arm looped through his? Or would he have been cold and refuse to engage in conversation?

She wished she knew the answer to her questions.

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When John reached the hill above Montacule Manor, he paused for just a second. The horse peered down over the brow of the hill with him so together they could stare at the expanse beyond them.

Set within a valley and between two rivers was the house itself. Montacule Manor had belonged to the Dukes of Pembrokeshire for generations, as far back as the Tudors themselves. Tall with square turrets made of dark yellow stone, the tall-arching windows flooded the place with light. Around the house, even at this distance, John could see the gardens were in full bloom, with the groundskeeper and the gardeners hard at work.

“Let’s go.” He pulled on the horse’s reins, eager to feel the wind rushing against him and distract himself for a minute from his whirring thoughts.

The horse cantered down the hill, growing into a faster and faster gallop until they reached the incline at the bottom where John feared they might just tip over together. Fortunately, it was a gallop he had done many times, and with good practice, he pulled the horse up at the last minute, ensuring it was safe as they reached the flattened land.

He steered the steed alongside the river, heading towards the house and searching out the glimpse of a driveway up ahead.

His eyes were distracted by the river, and his mind went to the time when Emma had fallen into the depths. She had been about thirteen at the time, and he had dived in to rescue her, not giving too much thought about it. Her gown was heavy with water, and she had been struggling to swim to the top alone. Fortunately, he was a strong swimmer, even then, and he had wrapped his arms around her waist, urging her to hold onto his neck before dragging her to the surface.

When they had broken the surface, seeing the panic in her eyes and the way she coughed to clear her throat, it was the first time he began to realize just how much she meant to him. He had barely left her side for the rest of the day, for he so badly wanted to be certain that there would be no aftereffects of her dip in the water.

Angered that coming home had only made him think even more about Emma, he turned the horse away from the river and towards the drive up ahead. He cantered quickly down the pebble path, reaching the front steps. They were wide and expansive, as a left-over from architects of generations ago, an entire entourage could have climbed the steps together, rather than just one man.

As John jumped down from the horse and began to make his way up the stairs, people slowly appeared.

“The duke is back!” the butler was calling as he flung open the front door. He began to issue a string of orders, and there was a commotion of people behind the front door. It was just a few minutes before the stable boys appeared ready to collect the horse from behind him.

When he reached the front door, the butler was bowing deeply to him.

“Your Grace, we did not expect you back so soon. I am so sorry, but the house is not prepared for you –” the butler was all a-quiver.

“You are too kind, Francis. There is no need to worry,” John said as he released himself from his jacket. “I have arrived back early and can quite understand why no one expected it. I did



not plan it myself until five minutes before I set off. Where is Peter?”

“I’ve sent for him now, Your Grace; he’ll be here soon,” Francis explained as he took John’s jacket. “Let me see to that for you.”

Before John could say anymore, a door nearby opened, and Peter Beverly appeared. The son of the last steward and estate manager, Peter had taken over the role around a similar time that John had become duke.

“Well, this is a surprise.” The stocky build of Peter stepped forward. “Did you ride all the way from Bath, Your Grace?” He laughed, gesturing to John’s countenance.

“With a small stop at Glastonbury,” John acknowledged nodding his head, making Peter’s brows knit together.

“What an odd journey to make. Something has happened then. We should get you a drink.”

“You can read my mind, Peter.” John led the way eagerly into the nearest drawing room. It was one of two in the manor house, and this was his favourite, usually because of the fine view it had over the gardens, though today, it was his favourite for its choice of liquor. As he reached for the drink’s cabinet, he was aware of Peter perching on the arm of a chair nearby.

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?”

“You could say that.” John downed the first swallow of brandy he poured before pouring a second one for himself and a separate one for Peter. “Sit down properly, Peter. There is something I have to tell you. I must confess it

now, or I fear I will go mad.”

## Chapter 9

“This sounds serious indeed,” Peter answered John as he took the brandy glass and sat properly in the chair. “What is on your mind?”

“It’s a delicate matter.” John sighed and paced the room, unable to settle. In his veins, he could still feel the pumping adrenaline from riding the horse so fast. It had helped him to escape the whirl of thinking of Emma, even if it was for a short while.

“Then we have all night to discuss it, I’m sure.” Peter smiled and sipped from the glass. John turned his eyes on the young steward, thankful for his friendship. Even though Peter always held the lines of respect, tipping his cap and addressing John as ‘your Grace’, the two had both grown up on the estate, and when John wasn’t next door at Arthur’s estate

as a boy, he was inevitably with Peter instead. Of all the people in the house, John knew he could trust Peter the most with his secrets. “Take a seat, Your Grace, or you’ll drive me mad too.”

John moved to the chair opposite Peter by the fire and perched on the very edge. For a minute, he stared at the golden-brown liquid in his glass as he geared up the courage to speak.

“Do you remember Arthur’s sister? Lady Emma Colbourne?” John asked slowly.

“I do.” Peter nodded. “The last time she was here, she was but a girl. I hear she has made her debut now.”

“She has,” John agreed with a nod. “I am not sure how to say this, Peter, but ...” He shifted

in his seat before deciding he couldn't sit there any longer and stood to his feet again, pacing up and down as the words finally fell from his lips. "Emma, to my mind, has always been, to be perfectly frank, the most enthralling lady I have ever met."

Once the words were said, they couldn't be unsaid. He knew that. He paused beside the fireplace and looked back to Peter, waiting for a reaction.

"I am failing to see why this is so maddening," Peter said with a small smile. "As far as I can see, is this not a good thing? You care for a woman you have known most of your life. There's a bond already there."

"Some bond." John shook his head and walked away again, knocking back the last of what was in the brandy glass. "I'm quite certain she doesn't like me very much, especially after the ball the other day."

“What happened at the ball?” Peter asked, prompting John to fall still and stare down at the dregs in his glass.

“I may have refused to dance with her,” John confessed. To his surprise, Peter laughed gently.

“Well, that is hardly what a gentleman usually does when he cares for someone.” Peter controlled his mirth and stared John in the eye. “Your Grace, why did you refuse to dance with her?”

“That doesn’t matter right now.” John looked away and topped up his glass again, eagerly needing the distraction and the burn of the brandy. “What matters is how mad I am going.” He gestured to his temple. “When I say that Emma is the most enthralling lady I have

ever met, even as I'm saying it, I know how much of an understatement that is."

He paced back the other way, crossing the room and reaching the window to stare out at the estate. Everything had come sharply into focus that day when he had seen Emma beside Lord Bolton and the eventuality that they might have kissed.

"What is the true statement?" Peter pushed him on. With his back turned, John found it a little easier to say the whole truth.

"I am in love with her." He sighed with the words and gulped from the brandy glass again.

"I feel like I should offer you congratulations," Peter said jovially. "A man realizing they're in love and have a wish to marry is not as common as we like to think. Tell me what it is



that troubles you so and why I can't offer such congratulations?"

"Because she appears to be courting another," John said sharply and turned back around. "I was there with them today while her brother was chaperoning. I watched as Lord Bolton not only led Emma around the ruins at Glastonbury, very alone, I might add, with us watching on at a distance, but I even think he might have –" He broke off suddenly, unable to say the words. He looked back to Peter to see his eyebrows raised.

"Well, shall I surmise that he may have done something improper?"

"Yes, let's say that," John agreed quickly. "The last time I saw Emma, she was just a girl; she was not yet a grown woman. Now she's been to finishing school, and she's of an age she could marry, and the first time I see her again, I am so tongue-tied that all I manage to do is

make an absolute fool of myself.” He shook his head in despair.

“So, she has no idea how you feel?” Peter asked slowly.

“None at all.” John paced back past Peter once again. “When I refused to dance with her, you should have seen how it offended her so.” He winced at the memory of it. “I didn’t mean any offence! I just couldn’t picture it. How could I dance with her?”

“I’m afraid my question is how could you not dance with the woman you care for, Your Grace?”

“What?” John whipped his head back around. Peter’s question had sounded so logical and straightforward under the circumstances that it wrongfooted John completely. He wobbled

on his feet, uncertain which way to pace around the room now.

“Your Grace, if I may speak out of turn?” Peter leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

“You know with me you always can.” John waved Peter on hurriedly. “Do not concern yourself with such things.”

“Then, if I can be completely honest ...” the steward looked up from the glass he had been gazing at. “I think it more interesting to ask why, when you did see Emma again, you did not declare your feelings?”

“What?” John couldn’t follow the question. Not exactly. It had just seemed so absurd at the ball even to consider speaking of what he felt.

“As you said, Your Grace,” Peter sat back in the chair, speaking as though it were obvious, “she is of an age where she can marry now, isn’t she? What would be more natural than her brother’s good friend and a man she has known her whole life, proposing to her? The bond between your families makes such a connection almost expected, even. It’s more than that. If we’re even to look at pure propriety, then it’s an eligible match indeed. Why would you hold your tongue and not declare it?”

“I ...” John paused and moved to the nearest table. Rather than refilling the brandy glass another time, he placed the glass on the table and slid it away from him, trying to clear his mind a little.

*Why couldn't I?*

“For her brother,” John found his voice at last. “For Arthur. It would feel almost as if I were betraying our friendship to suddenly pursue his sister. It would not be right.”

“I see.” Peter nodded slowly and turned his eyes up to the ceiling. “There is something there as well, though, that I do not understand.”

“What do you mean?” John perched on the edge of the table, turning to look at Peter.

“As I have just said, the Duke of Hawksby has probably suspected the connection as much as the next man would. You are an eligible match for her, and you are his good friend; therefore, he knows you would treat his sister with honour,” Peter carried on, clearly unwilling to stop speaking just yet. “In fact, Your Grace, I half wonder if you are using your friendship with the Duke of Hawksby as just an excuse.”

John felt his spine straighten, from the want to argue with Peter's point, but the more he looked at the open and honest face of the steward, the more he realized how accurately he had read the situation.

"In fact, Your Grace," Peter offered a sad sort of smile, "if I were a betting man, I'd say it was more that you were scared of Lady Colbourne's reaction to your declaration. *That* is the reason you have not declared your love, and it has very little to do with the Duke of Hawksby at all. Now, what do you say to that?"

John wavered, unable to argue with it; he swallowed and looked down at his feet.

"It might be the reason." Hearing how pathetic he sounded, he stood straight and leapt off the

table. "All of this is pointless to discuss anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that how I feel hardly matters." John shook his head, reaching for the brandy glass again. "She is courting Lord Bolton now, so any chance I had has gone." He topped up the glass, determined to stop thinking of Emma for one night.

If only he could.

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Emma couldn't stop thinking of the trip to the ruins the whole journey back home. As the carriage entered Bath, it had grown dark

beyond the windows. The mixture of shadows and orange orbs from the gas lamps leaking through the windows made the carriage dance between light and darkness. She tried to lose herself in gazing at them, but she could not, for her mind was too busy.

Some moments she thought of Lord Bolton and how certain she had been that he would kiss her. Other moments, she thought of when he had wished her goodbye and seen her to her carriage. How his lips had lingered on her gloved hand to kiss her goodbye had made her want to snap her hand out of his reach.

If she was not thinking of Lord Bolton, then her mind was occupied with John. She could barely stop thinking of the way she had heard his horse riding fast away from the ruins. He was galloping at such a speed it was as though the flames of hell were at his heels.

*Why did he leave in such a way?*



None of it made sense to her mind.

“Lord Bolton seems to have taken an immense liking to you, Emma,” Arthur said at her side as he gazed out of the window. She turned towards him, watching his face as it slipped between light and shadow. “I have never seen any gentleman be so attentive towards you before.”

“It is true,” She nodded, a little sadly, for it was not exactly welcome, she decided. If only she could have turned the tables on the day and wandered the ruins with John beside her instead of Lord Bolton, then she would have been happy.

“He called you Emma,” Arthur pointed out, turning back to look at her. “It seems to me then you must hold him in high regard as

well.”

“Well ... I mean, I ...” she faltered, not knowing what to say. She didn’t wish to insult the man. “I do not know him particularly well. He was the one who wished to call me Emma, and he asked me to call him Anthony.”

“And ... will you?” Arthur prompted to which Emma just shrugged in response. She was uncertain what she was going to do.

“He would make a very eligible match, Emma,” Arthur said with a sigh of contentment. Her eyes widened as she looked at her brother; it was clear there was a smile there, one of comfort.

“Then, you approve of Lord Bolton?” she asked, startled by it.

“I do.” He nodded. “He thinks highly of you; that is clear. He has pursued you well and comes from a good family. From what I have seen of him in town, he is popularly liked by many. I can see many advancements in the match. His family comes from wealth too.”

“You are back to talking of marriage as though it is business,” she said, finishing with a sigh.

“I don’t mean it in that way.” He reached out for her hand, startling her with its warmth. “I know it may sound business-minded, but you are my sister. It is my responsibility to make sure that whoever you marry will take care of you. I take that duty very seriously.” He offered her a smile she couldn’t help returning. It was the first time she had heard him talk so, and it touched her very dearly.

“Thank you, Arthur.” She leaned into him,

resting her head on his shoulder momentarily. She was tempted to tell her brother the truth of the matter, that she couldn't care for Lord Bolton because her heart lay with another, yet the words fell dead. If Arthur was looking out for her, then she knew what his answer would be. He would warn her off, for caring for John would only lead her to get her heart broken.

“In fact, the more I know Lord Bolton, the more convinced I am that he could be a good match for you,” Arthur said with a smile. Emma tried to take comfort in the idea, but instead, she felt backed into a corner. If Arthur thought Lord Bolton was the best man for her, then ... perhaps he was.

“Tell me,” Emma decided to change the subject slightly, “what has come of our mother's attempt to persuade you to marry? Have you found anyone that you admire?”

Her brother looked startled, his eyebrows

raising so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline.

“No,” he said quickly, his voice much higher pitched than normal.

“Really?” she struggled to hide her laugh. “Because that sounded very much like a lie to me, brother.”

“Well, sister, you are merely inventing something that’s not there.” He shrugged. “There is no one.”

“Then why did your voice go all squeaky?”

“It didn’t!”

“Ah – there it goes again.” She pointed at him just as he shook his head avidly. “Arthur, I’ve known you my whole life. Do you really think I can’t tell when you’re lying?”

“You’re annoyingly good at detecting it.” He sighed and rested his head back on the carriage.

“There we are,” she said, gesturing to him again. “You have just admitted you were lying. So, there is someone. Come on, tell me her name?”

“Never,” he said vehemently, lifting his head back off the carriage again. “Let’s just say ... it doesn’t matter if there is someone or not.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because it can never be,” he said quickly. “That is the end of the story.” His words sounded strangely to familiar to her, for she had repeated them to herself so often when she thought of John.

*It can never be.*

“Now, let us talk of something else instead,” Arthur went on. “Such as the concert you are to attend with Lord Bolton.”

## Chapter 10

“This is hardly going to be helping you.” Peter sighed beside John.

“On the contrary, I think it will,” John pushed open the door with his foot. The old wood splintered slightly, and dust kicked up around them. They both coughed and waved their hands in the air, trying to clear the dust a little.

John was the first of the pair to step into the old mill. Seeing it again after all this time made him feel as though he were just a boy again, running around the place with Arthur and Emma. Since then, the mill had been shut up and out of use for years.



He could remember a particular memory of Emma when she was little. Perhaps just seven or eight at the time. She had been trying to climb up to the rafters in the attic where he and Arthur had run off to, trying to follow them. She had slipped on the ladder, though, and come crashing back down to the bottom floor with a bump.

He could even trace on the wooden floor where she had fallen because he remembered distinctly running down to her and finding her with her leg cut open. He had carried her all the way back to the house then, just so the housekeeper could patch up the blood. He hadn't put her down the whole journey back.

Being inside, John had discovered it had turned into something of a dumping ground from the estate. As he wandered the wheel room, he found several pieces of old carts that must have broken somewhere in the estate had been tossed in there to be forgotten.

Mice ran amok too between the beams, and one such mouse came so close that John nearly stood on it. There were pigeons, too, nesting in the rafters, that all took flight the moment he and Peter climbed to the second floor, into the attic of the mill.

“You don’t have to do this now, Your Grace,” Peter said again, but John just ignored the argument.

“It’s good to think of something else,” he said boldly, his mind already made up. He took off his jacket and folded it over a nearby beam before rolling up his sleeves and getting to work. “If we want the architect to turn this place into a school, then the first thing we need to do is clear this place out.”

“You know as well as I do that you could simply order the stable boys to do this,” Peter pointed out as he too rolled up his sleeves.

“I’ll be glad of the work and the distraction.” John got straight to work, piling the clutter high and chucking it out of the door. They were making two piles, one to be placed in the rubbish and the other to go into storage up at the main estate.

When John had woken that morning, he had known without a doubt that the thing to do now was to throw himself into building the school. That way, he would think less and less of Emma. He hadn’t thought the task would simply remind him of Emma after their discussions about the school. That was an unfortunate consequence.

He and Peter had been working for long hours, sometimes in silence and other times in chatter when they took a break. They wandered out of the water mill and sat overlooking the water with their feet dangling so far down they nearly touched the river.

It was a beautiful day, with the sunshine reflecting the river surface and basking them in warmth. In that sharp light, John found himself looking back at the mill and the progress they had made so far.

*I wonder what Emma would think if she could see the place now.*

Realizing where his thoughts had gone, he sucked in a breath and turned back to look at the river.

“Distraction only goes so far, Your Grace,” Peter said as he looked over the river. “Sooner or later, your problems come back to be faced with.”

“How is it you sound so wise?” John asked with a smile, shaking his head. “You’re far too young to be that wise yet.”

“Perhaps I should grow a white beard and get a monocle too?” Peter laughed. “Then you might take my advice seriously.”

“Advice?” John asked. “You wish to give me advice?”

“I do, Your Grace, if you will take it.” Peter nodded, then turned to look at him, clearly waiting for permission.

“You never need to walk on eggshells around me, Peter. Speak,” John encouraged with a wave of his hand.

“Well, it seems to me that you are giving up before the fight is over,” Peter said, looking out to the river.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that Lady Colbourne is not yet betrothed, is she?” Peter asked, clearly waiting for an answer.

“Not yet,” John said, shifting uncomfortably, “but it could be any day now that she is.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Peter asked as though the point were obvious. “I think you should declare your feelings to her.”

“I can’t –”

“Why not?”

“Because she wouldn’t choose me,” John hurried to explain.

“How do you know she wouldn’t?” Peter asked with a smile, forcing John to fall silent, not knowing what else to say. “As far as I can see, your happiness is in Lady Colbourne’s hands. She can either return your love or marry another. Well, she can hardly be expected to make the decision when she’s not aware she has the decision to make, can she?” he asked, his hands out wide in apparent wonder. “You said you behave quite distant towards her, yes? Your Grace?”

“I do,” John acknowledged with a nod. “I’ve even avoided her at all costs when in the house with her.”

“Therefore, she has absolutely no idea how you feel,” Peter said strongly. “Maybe if you declare how you feel, reveal what you really feel rather than hiding behind this cold persona, maybe she could see you for who you really are.” He smiled as if concluding his advice. “As far as I can see, the lady has a choice between a duke and a lord then. A lord she has just met and a duke she has known since she was little. Who do you think she’ll choose?”

“I wish I had your optimism.” John chuckled, shaking his head at the foolishness of the idea.

“I like optimism. It’s a happier way to live a life. Don’t you think?” Peter asked, turning to look at him again. “What do you think about telling her then, Your Grace?”

“I ...” John faltered for a second, looking



down at the river. "I'll think about it."

A minute later, Peter stood up and clapped him on the shoulder before returning to clearing out the mill. John took a few more minutes before he joined him, for his mind was stuck between two places. The first place was where all hope was lost, and the second place was thinking on what Peter had said and whether there was still a chance. Yet to do it, he'd have to take a chance, tell Emma the truth, and risk getting his heart crushed too.

After he'd finished clearing out the mill for the day, he returned to the house and ended up in the library. He concentrated on collecting books he could furnish the school with, ones he no longer read and could lend there for the children to learn to read from. He picked some basic stories and tales of fiction before moving onto books that tried to talk of science and history in their most basic detail. That's when he found a book on Queen Elizabeth.

His hand tarried for a while over the spine, for it was an old book indeed with the leather beginning to crack and a few pages being a little loose. He had read it before and had delighted in it, for it was a different account of Queen Elizabeth's life. One that was much more personal, with contemporary descriptions of the queen included.

*Emma would surely enjoy reading it.*

Without thinking too much about it, he crossed the library and began to wrap up the book in tissue paper. At the very end, he decided to slot in a small note for her to read. He agonized over it, writing different drafts until he came up with something he could be happy with.

The note said little, but at the very least, it gave him a starting point. Now, with these words committed down to paper, he would

have no choice but to explain himself next time he saw her.

He slipped the note into the package and finished wrapping it up before taking it to the butler and asking for an express messenger to deliver the book. Then he returned to the books in the library he was preparing for the school and wished with each new book he laid out that Emma was there to decide whether they would be useful to the children.

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“Emma, there’s a gift for you here,” Arthur called through the drawing room door. Emma had been looking so far down the road in anticipation of Anne’s carriage arriving that she hadn’t even noticed someone had walked up to the front door.

“A gift?” she repeated in surprise, stepping out into the entrance hall.

“Quite a big one,” Arthur whistled as the messenger passed the largest bunch of flowers into Emma’s hands she had ever seen. She took them with wide eyes as the pollen shot up her nose and made her crinkle it in objection.

“This is ... quite something,” she remarked just as Arthur snapped off the note from the bottom of the bunch. He laughed when he saw the wax seal. “Who is it from?”

“Do you need to ask?” He kept laughing and turned the letter for her to see the wax seal that bore Lord Bolton’s emblem.

“I see,” she said.

“You do not look particularly happy,” Arthur remarked.

“I am, of course, I am.” She brought a smile to her cheeks, trying to dispel any want of sadness. “Would you fetch me a vase, please?”

“Of course, My Lady.” The butler nodded and hurried off in search of a vase. Emma stood perfectly still as she looked down at the bunch, staring between the carnations and the daisies in surprise.

“That’s not the response I was expecting to Lord Bolton’s gift,” Arthur said with evident suspicion. “Here, you open his note while I take those from you.” Emma happily swapped with him, only too happy to get rid of the temptation to sneeze strongly. She tore open the note quickly and found Lord Bolton’s fine handwriting across the parchment.

*My dear Emma,*

*Though I cannot be with you at this moment, I wanted you to know that I will be there with you in my thoughts. Here is a small token for you. Flowers that I hope will bring you half the smile that you do me.*

*Yours,*

*Anthony.*

Emma didn't feel any leap at his flirtatious words; she just folded up the parchment instead.

“Did that improve your mood?” Arthur asked just as the butler returned with the vase.

“He said some lovely things.” She smiled, hoping that she could make her brother smile too. She was relieved when he did and turned to place the flowers in the vase.

She was about to return to the drawing room when there was another knock on the door. The butler rushed past them to open the door, beyond which stood another messenger.

“A parcel for Lady Colbourne, Sir.” The messenger bowed his head and hurried off again down the steps.

“Two gifts?” Arthur asked, looking away from the flowers. “Lord Bolton is eager.”

The butler turned to pass the parcel into Emma's hands. Startled by it, through the paper she could feel it was a book. She highly doubted Lord Bolton would give her something as well thought out as a book. She turned to rest the parcel on the table beside the flowers and pulled open the paper.

Slowly, a very old book was revealed. Feeling her breath hitch at the sight, Emma stared down at the book in amazement. It was at least a hundred years old, one of the early bound books, and had to be extremely valued and treasured. The cracks in the spine showed it was well-thumbed, but the smooth leather showed it had been cared for dearly too.

"What is that?" Arthur looked over her shoulder.

"It's called a book, Arthur." She laughed at him. "You know, those things in the library



that you have little liking for?”

“You make me so like an oaf who can’t read.”  
He laughed too and stepped away, looking back to the flowers again.

Emma opened the cover to reveal the title page on the inside of the book. Her mouth fell open as she read the title.

*An examination of the life of our Queen Elizabeth, from contemporary accounts and her own letters.*

“Oh my,” she gasped as she read the page. It could not be a better gift.

“Well, that was an interesting reaction. I take it Lord Bolton did well with his second gift

then?”

“This can’t be from Lord Bolton,” she said firmly, knowing it was just not possible. A note fell out from the tissue paper, and she grabbed it up, pausing only to recognize the wax seal on the parchment.

*That is the seal of the Duke of Pembrokeshire.*

She ripped it open, startled by it.

*Dear Lady Colbourne,*

*Today I have been organizing books to give to the school when I came across this. I have read it myself and am certain you would treasure this more than I could. I am sure you will enjoy it.*

*When I see you next, there is something I must speak to you about. As a matter of urgency.*

*Yours etcetera,*

*John Kennerley, Duke of Pembershire.*

“It’s from John,” she said aloud.

“What?” Arthur said, as startled as she was. He made to walk to her side, just as she closed the parchment, for some reason desiring to keep the note a secret from him.

*What does John wish to speak to me about?*

“Everything all right, Emma?”

Before she could answer Arthur, there was a knock on the door, and Emma was thankful for the interruption, rushing towards it in the hope of finding Anne on the other side. When she opened it, she was not greeted with Anne’s face, but Lord Bolton’s.

“Lord Bolton!” she said quickly in surprise. “I ... your note said you would not be here today.”

“I am pleased to see you received my flowers, Emma. I couldn’t stay away in the end.” He persisted with using her first name and reached for her hand, kissing the back quickly. She was dismayed she did not have her glove on, for this time, she felt him kiss her hand directly before he turned to notice Arthur behind her.

“Your Grace, how are you today?”

“Very well, to what do we owe the pleasure?”  
Arthur asked, moving forward to her side.

Emma had hidden the parchment behind her back that held John’s note, eager for Lord Bolton not to notice it. To her surprise, she felt a tug on the note as Arthur tried to take it out of her hand. She clamped her fingers on it even tighter, with the two of them going over a tug of war hidden behind her back.

“I came to see if Emma would attend the promenade with me this afternoon,” Lord Bolton said with a smile, turning his gaze back to her.

“I am afraid I am already engaged this

afternoon,” she said quickly, “I am waiting on my friend Miss Anne Braithwaite now.”

“We’ll come with you,” Arthur declared at her side, just as he tried to tug the note out of her grasp. She held even tighter.

“You will?” she asked, startled.

“Of course,” Arthur said, turning his head just as the carriage appeared beyond the dip in the road. He gave up his attempt to pull the letter out of her hand and clambered down the steps past Lord Bolton, heading towards the carriage. When he reached the door, he opened it, not bothering to wait for a footman and held out a hand to help Anne down.

“What do you say then, Emma?” Lord Bolton said, making a reach for her hand. She was so distracted watching her brother and Anne that

the touch shocked her. She tried to retreat from him, just as she noticed how Anne placed her hand in Arthur's stunned that he had approached to help her down. "Shall we be going then, Emma?"

"Y-yes, of course," she stuttered, still distracted as they walked down the steps together. The butler bustled behind her, presenting her with gloves and a thin pelisse, just as she joined the others.

"We are off to promenade?" Anne asked Emma, her face betraying her surprise.

"That we are," Emma agreed just as Arthur presented his arm to Anne.

"How interesting," she said, whispering so that Lord Bolton couldn't hear her. "Tell me, Your Grace, is this a promenade with one particular

aim in mind?”

“How very astute of you.” He laughed and drew Anne away towards the park nearby, leaving Emma to follow behind reluctantly on Lord Bolton’s arm, just as she hurried to hide John’s note in a pocket in her pelisse.



## Chapter 11

“You seem rather distracted this afternoon, Emma?” Lord Bolton said beside her, with her hand resting in the crook of his arm.

“I apologize,” Emma said, turning to offer him a smile. “I am simply distracted by my brother, that is all.”

“If I am not much mistaken, your brother is quite occupied with another right now.” Lord Bolton chuckled.

“It is that which puzzles me,” Emma said eagerly with a nod, looking up ahead of her to where Arthur and Anne walked.

Right now, Anne was not walking on his arm but looking at the flowers nearby. She was always one for defying convention and had walked off the path, walking through the trees to look at the wildflowers in detail. To Emma's surprise, her brother had followed Anne only too eagerly.

"Why does it puzzle you?" Lord Bolton asked. "He is with your friend."

"It is not that," Emma struggled to explain. "Anne is a delight," she hurried to say more, "I just haven't seen my brother be so attentive before." It was the truth. Usually, Arthur gave her friends a distance. It had not passed any of them by that some of her friends were only really her friends because they were trying to catch the idea of the Duke of Hawksby. For Arthur to be so attentive was simply out of the pattern.

“Let us not talk of them the whole time.” Lord Bolton touched Emma’s hand again that rested on his arm. She nearly retreated. Instead, she dipped her free hand into the pocket of her pelisse and clung onto the note from John where she had hidden it.

“Yes, of course,” Emma said quickly, tearing her eyes away from Arthur and Anne, just as Anne said something that appeared to make her brother fall about in deep laughter. “Tell me, how long do you intend to stay in Bath? I remember you said that you usually live in London.”

“I was intending a few weeks,” Lord Bolton said with a smile, “now, I intend it to be for the whole Season. At least,” he stressed the words and held her gaze, making her shift her hand on his arm.

“And you are staying with your uncle?” she asked.

“I am. He much prefers to keep himself to himself.”

“Oh.” She sighed a little at the idea. “So, I won’t have the pleasure of meeting him at any of our events?”

“I am afraid not,” he said, shaking his head. “He rarely ventures out at all.”

“For that, I am sorry.” She smiled. “After all, you have met my brother; it seems right I should meet someone from your family.” To her surprise, Lord Bolton did not reply very quickly; he seemed uncomfortable for the first time in their conversation. “I am sorry; did I offend you in some way?”

“Not at all,” he assured, turning his customary smile back on her. Once again, he was his charming self, and all sight of his discomfort had vanished. “I was just thinking of my uncle and how nervous he is with meeting new people. I am afraid I may not be able to make the introduction.”

“As you wish,” she said with a smile. “Are your parents at all intending to see you while you are staying in Bath?”

“That is yet to be decided.” He pulled her further through the park. “Now, let us talk about the concert this week.”

Emma frowned as he directed their conversation the other way. To her mind, the more she thought about Lord Bolton’s words, the more she was convinced he was trying to avoid any mention of his family at all. As though he did not want her to meet them.

*How odd indeed.*

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Emma was only too pleased when Lord Bolton took his leave, and they returned to the house. She and Anne hurried into the sitting room overlooking the garden to share tea, but to her surprise, Arthur did not leave them. Instead, he joined them for their tea.

“So, I see much has been happening since I saw you last,” Anne said with a little laugh. “And your brother has been telling me at length of how Lord Bolton escorted you to the Glastonbury Abbey ruins.” She nodded to Arthur.

“Have you been gossiping about me, Arthur?”

Emma asked, raising her eyebrows as she poured out some tea for her and Arthur.

“You’re making it easy to gossip about you at the moment,” he teased with a smile, just as he passed a plate of small sandwiches over to Anne. “Miss Braithwaite, would you like one?”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said quickly, picking a sandwich up and digging in eagerly. “So Emma, now I wish to hear it from your mouth. If your brother is to be believed, a betrothal is not far off.”

“That is surely some distance away yet!” Emma complained, nearly dropping the milk jug.

“Notice, Your Grace, her sudden clumsiness,” Anne said with mischief, leaning over the arm of her chair towards Arthur. He leant in, too,

as though enjoying the conspiratorial tone. “Such things usually mean there is more here than she wishes to give away.”

“I enjoy your observations, Miss Braithwaite.” He laughed and picked up a sandwich of his own. “Are we to take it that her clumsiness in this instance means a betrothal has already been discussed?”

“Arthur!” Emma complained loudly, feeling her blush fill her cheeks.

“No,” Anne shook her head. “For she would not be so outraged if they had discussed as much.”

“You think not?” Arthur prompted her on.



“No,” Anne said again, eagerly. “But I take it from Lady Colbourne’s reaction that Lord Bolton has left her in no doubt of her affection?”

Emma said nothing. She just picked up her cup and hid her growing blush behind the teacup.

“I think we should take that as confirmation, Your Grace.” Anne giggled, to which he chuckled too.

“In which case, a betrothal must be very near indeed.” Arthur laughed and offered Anne another sandwich.

“You two are being mischievous on purpose. I’m convinced of it,” Emma said boldly and pushed Anne’s teacup towards her. “Anne, I thought you came here to see me. So far, you

are being mischievous with my brother instead.”

“You are the one who went promenading with Lord Bolton.” Anne was still giggling. “What else was I supposed to do? Walk alone? I was grateful your brother kept me company.”

“We enjoyed ourselves,” Arthur said. “You are not the only one who can have fun, Emma.” These words made Emma’s eyebrows rise a little.

“I am sorry,” Anne leaned forward towards Emma. “I am only teasing you.”

“I know.” Emma sighed, wishing she could tell Anne about the note from John, yet that was now impossible with Arthur sitting so closely beside Anne.

“What do you wish to talk of instead? How about the concert?” As Anne encouraged Emma into conversation, she returned to a more buoyant mood. Yet now and then, her gaze was drawn back to her brother.

While Anne’s focus was purely on Emma, she could see that Arthur seemed to be taking every opportunity he could to watch her friend closely.

Stunned, Emma thought back to what her brother had said in the carriage on the way back from Glastonbury Abbey when she had asked if there was a woman in his life.

*‘Because it can never happen.’*

Emma began to analyze Arthur as he gazed at

Anne all the more, thinking on these words. Anne was separated from him entirely in position. As a duke, he was expected to marry for advancement, and Anne would not give him that.

*Was that what he meant?*

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When Anne took her leave that evening before dinner, Emma and Arthur stood by the door, waving her off. Only when the carriage had disappeared from view did the two of them retreat inside.

“Well, that was an interesting day,” Emma said, walking straight past the flowers placed on the hallway table and reaching for the book sent to her by John.

“That it was,” Arthur said, glancing back to the door. “Lord Bolton’s visits are becoming more and more frequent.”

“I was thinking of my other visitor,” Emma smiled, turning to look at her brother. Arthur turned back, with his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Of Miss Braithwaite?” he asked.

“Yes.” Emma nodded eagerly. “If I wasn’t mistaken, you seem to have as much interest in talking to her as I did. If not more.”

“Absurd,” Arthur shrugged and went to walk past her. “I was merely keeping Miss Braithwaite company while you promenaded with Lord Bolton.”

“Yes, but you could have left when we had tea,” Emma was going further, wanting to tease her brother as much as he had teased her earlier that day. “You stare at her quite a lot; did you know that?” she picked up her book and headed towards the staircase.

“I do not,” he complained quickly.

“You did today.” Emma giggled as she began to walk up the steps. “I’m beginning to think the lady that has turned your head is none other than Anne.”

“Emma,” Arthur moved to the bottom of the staircase. “Concentrate on your own love life. Leave mine alone,” he spoke quickly and hurried off into his study. The moment he left, Emma found Arthur’s words hit home, and the truth became clear.

*Love life.*

She did not love Lord Bolton. She never could.

In fact, there was only one man she had ever come near to loving, and his note still resided in the pelisse placed on a hook near the front door.

Once she was certain Arthur was locked in his study, she walked down the stairs again and hurried to the pelisse, taking out the note and hiding it in her book, before hurrying up the stairs and towards her chamber.

As she reached her chamber, she hurried to light candles from a tinder box; now that darkness was beginning to fall beyond the

windows, the better to see her book. Then she hurried to sit by the fire in her armchair and pulled her book into her lap to hold up into the candlelight. The first thing she read was John's note again. She kept tarrying on the final words.

*When I see you next, there is something I must speak to you about. As a matter of urgency.*

She couldn't understand what it could be.

She lost herself in reading the book while dinner was prepared. With each page she turned, she hoped dinner would run later and later, just so that she could keep reading. When she came to a natural stop, she decided she could not leave John's gift unanswered. He'd not only given her a gift, but a gift that couldn't have shown better how well he knew her.



She placed the book down on her writing desk and hurried to write a note of her own. She wrote a few drafts before throwing them all away and opting to write something simple instead, fearful that if she said anymore, she would reveal something in her heart that she feared to say.

*Your Grace,*

*I cannot thank you enough for your kind gift. This evening, I have already begun, and I do not doubt I will be up for most of the night reading more. It is a beautiful book too that I guess came from your estate library.*

*It was a very kind gift indeed.*

She paused before adding a final line, something that was a little more heartfelt.

*I was sorry to see you left Bath so soon. I look forward to you returning soon.*

*Yours etcetera,*

*Lady Emma Colbourne.*

She finished the letter with a flourish and sat back, sealing the letter quickly. Her final line had been the truth; she couldn't wait for John to return to Bath, partly in the hope to see him again and partly to the fact that she hoped it settled her mind on what she thought of Lord Bolton for good.

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“Your Grace?” Peter’s voice called up to John as he clambered around the rafters of the mill.

“Yes?” he called back down, peering between the beams. His hands kept grazing the exposed wood that had been worn through the years of storage.

“You have a letter.” Peter held the note aloft. “It arrived just now. From Bath, I believe.”

John hurried down from the loft, climbing down the ladder until he reached the mill’s ground floor and looked around.

Much had changed in the last couple of days of clearing out the building. The mill was practically empty now, and John was waiting on the architect’s drawings for turning it into a school. The general thought was that if the loft

floor could be taken out, the ceiling height could be raised, bringing in greater light. It also meant the ladder and some of the beams from the bottom floor could be lost too, creating more space for the school room.

He was confident now more than ever that the building could be a suitable school. It would just take a little more renovation and work, but soon this place would be filled with children with a new future ahead of them. He was so pleased with the idea that he paused and gazed around the room, trying to imagine how it could look. That was until a letter appeared in front of his eyes, proffered by Peter.

“I thought you might like to see this, as it’s from Bath.”

“Thank you.” John took the letter, expecting it to be from Arthur, yet when he turned to see the address, he could see the handwriting did

not belong to Arthur. From the slant and style, it could well belong to Emma.

Startled, John hurried out of the mill and into the sunlight, breaking open the wax seal so he could read the note as fast as he could.

He read it twice, with his eyes particularly lingering on the last sentence.

*She was sad to see me go, and she liked the gift.*

“Well?” Peter’s voice came from the mill’s doorway, urging him to look back around and see his steward leaning on the doorframe. “Is it from the Duke of Hawksby? Or from his sister?” he asked with a knowing smile.

“Emma,” John said with a smile.

“And did she give you hope or not?”

John felt his smile grow even wider.

“Hope,” he answered.

“Then, Your Grace, to be bold,” Peter stepped forward. “Why are you not heading back to Bath yet?”

“You’re right.” John laughed and hurried up the track, rushing as quickly as he could back to the house. “I’m on my way now.”

## Chapter 12

“Eligible, yes, it would be very eligible,” Emma was muttering to herself as she walked round in circles in the garden. Her mind was a whirl. She was utterly convinced now that she didn’t love Lord Bolton and never could, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t marry him. If she could develop more of a liking for him, then marriage was certainly possible, especially when her brother was encouraging the idea so much.

“Eligible, I don’t like the word at all,” she murmured again as she swiped at a nearby fuchsia bush and walked down the path of the formal garden, watching the purple and pink flower heads dance with the movement.

It had struck her last night as she laid in bed that this was the word Arthur had relied upon

when he talked about why he approved of the match so. *Eligible*. Yet every time Emma said the word aloud, it left her feeling only cold and put out. It had no warmth or excitement to it at all.

Quite different from how she felt when she thought of John's name or read his note delivered with his book.

"So, this is where you are hiding?" a voice called from the bottom of the garden.

Emma whipped her head round, relieved at the voice. Anne was hovering in the doorway, looking out across the grass.

"Well, it's a lovely day for it," she remarked as she pointed up to the sun. "If you are hiding, though, tell me now, and I promise to leave you in peace."



“Oh no.” Emma ran towards her friend, lifting the skirt around her knees as she hurried. “I’d infinitely rather have your company.” She took Anne’s hand only too gladly and drew her down the garden. “But this is a surprise; what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you here today?”

“I felt guilty after teasing you so yesterday,” Anne acknowledged, looping their arms together.

“You know I love your humour.” Emma laughed, “I would never have you any other way.”

“Oh, I know.” Anne giggled. “I am always prepared to make a joke, which other ladies do not seem so ready to do in Bath, but yesterday I went away feeling bad.” She

controlled her mirth and led Emma further down the garden. “So, I wanted to come and talk to you in private, away from your brother, to ask how you truly feel about Lord Bolton and how things are progressing.”

“In truth?” Emma asked, her words failing her. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Anne asked, pausing in their walk. “Do you like him?”

“He seems nice enough. He is pleasant, charismatic, charming even.”

“All good words,” Anne agreed with a smirk. “Most women would say those three things add up to more than just making a man ‘nice.’”

“I know.” Emma smiled a little sadly. “Let us just say that I don’t know how to feel at present. I do not love him, far from it, but he seems pleasant, and maybe that is all that is really needed for marriage anyway.” She drew Anne forward again. They fell into silence momentarily, hovering by the trees and the pond at the far end of the garden. The quieter they were, the more Emma was aware of Anne’s look of pensiveness. “You are thinking something, very intently.”

“I am,” Anne admitted with a nod.

“Then please, let me know what it is,” Emma encouraged with a wave of her hand. “If it is advice, then especially share that, for I greatly need it.”

“Oh no! I couldn’t advise you,” she said quickly, shaking her head.

“Why ever not?” Emma asked, somewhat amused by Anne’s strong reaction.

“You are Lady Colbourne, the sister of Duke Hawksby,” Anne said with a deferential tone and gestured towards Emma with her free hand. “I am just Miss Braithwaite, from a family that it is fair to say is not so successful in life. If there is advice here, then Emma, I am the one who should come to you for advice.”

“How absurd!” Emma said, pulling her friend forward so they could circle the pond together. “One’s social standing does not reflect their intelligence or their ability to give advice. Please, if you have a good thought, then I would only be too happy to hear it.”

“Well, it’s just ...” Anne paused, looking down into the pond. “I am not thinking of advice,

just so much my own gut feeling.”

“Which is?” Emma encouraged her on.

“On the one hand, a life not in love with one’s partner sounds quite sad,” she admitted with a nod, “but my mother tells me every day that we cannot be choosy. She is pushing me more towards Mr Hamilton again.”

“You have refused him once!” Emma said with feeling. “Is that not enough?”

“Apparently not.” Anne sighed, shaking her head. “I’m beginning to fear ...” she paused with her words and paused in her walking too. “Maybe we do not have the freedom to choose who we marry, as much as we like to think we do?”

A sound at the far end of the garden alerted Emma's attention, and she looked up to see Arthur hurrying out of the house toward them.

"I daresay you're right," she acknowledged in a murmur, thinking again of how much Arthur had used the word 'eligible'. "Maybe the choice is made by our family instead. By my brother and by your mother."

"I wish it were not the case," Anne said before bringing a smile into place shortly before Arthur reached them.

Once again, Emma was distracted by Arthur's arrival as he turned straight to Anne and asked how she was today.

*What is Arthur doing?*

\*\*\*

With the sun setting beyond the trees, John had no choice but to bring his horse to a halt at a crossroads in his route. He looked up and down the road, seeking an inn. The more the sun dropped, the darker the orange hues cast across the countryside. He'd set off too late in the day to make the whole trip to Bath before dark and would have to break for the night.

Recognizing the old wooden signs at the side of the road, he turned the steed he was riding and headed down the street, knowing a little further on he would find an inn.

By the time he reached the stable of the inn, darkness had completely set in. With his eyes adjusted to the nighttime sky, he led the steed under cover and towards a stable boy with a ha'penny for his trouble, before heading into

the inn itself.

The moment he stepped inside, his ears were deafened by some kind of drunken raucous. He covered his ears and moved forward, looking into the bar for a better look. He couldn't discern the faces right away, but there seemed to be some kind of hunting party of gentlemen that had made their break there for the night.

In no mood to enjoy such drunken chants and shouts, he turned to the innkeeper and rented a room for the night.

“Will you want dinner, Your Grace?” the innkeeper asked, gesturing to the bar area where the drunken jeers were only getting worse.

“I ...” John was about to refuse, despite the



hunger rumbling in his stomach, when one of the hunting party moved to the side and a familiar face was revealed.

*Is that ... Lord Bolton?*

Indeed, it was. Lord Bolton sat in the middle of the crowd, jesting with those around him. He was so blind drunk that his face was scarlet red, and he could barely sit straight in the chair, lolling to the side instead.

“Your Grace?” the innkeeper prompted, unaware that John was somewhat distracted.

“Yes, I will, thank you,” John said quickly and strode towards the bar area. He took a table at the far edge of the hunting party, watching the group in amazement.

There were five gentlemen in total, all of Lord Bolton's age bar one, an older man who had similar features to Lord Bolton himself. He could possibly be the uncle John had heard so much talk of.

More drinks were served to the group, just as John was given an ale. He watched in horror and a little disgust as Lord Bolton knocked back nearly his whole tankard in one. He was cheered on by two men who sat either side of him, jeering as though they were still at school rather than gentlemen at all.

"I think we need another," Lord Bolton said, laughing and slurring his words together. He tried to stand on his feet, but the moment he did, he lost balance and began to capitulate to the side, firmly in John's direction.

John tried to move out of the way, but despite Lord Bolton's addled brain due to the drink, he

still managed to stand straight and get in the way. He reached out, blind drunk, with two hands. One went to the table beside John, and the other went to his shoulder, with a vice-like grip.

“Woah, s-sorry about that,” Lord Bolton slurred as he released John’s shoulder, but not the table. He stood so close that as he wavered on his feet, he kept nearly bumping into John, no matter how far he leaned out of the way. “Wait a minute ...” Lord Bolton paused and lifted a hand, pointing straight at John’s face. “Do I know you?”

John frowned, amazed that they had only been introduced a few days ago, and yet Lord Bolton could forget him already.

“You are uncertain?” John asked, tempted to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“Ah – I am useless with faces, my friend.” Lord Bolton shrugged, nearly tipping over with the movement. John reached out and took the man’s arm, steadying him. He had no liking for the man, especially as he was pursuing Emma, but John was still too decent to see a man fall flat on his face.

“Yes, you said before,” John remembered, thinking that Lord Bolton was actually just too drunk to see him properly. The man kept blinking madly, and his eyes appeared glacial, as though everything were blurred in front of his face. “Tell me, do you know how many fingers I’m holding up?”

“Erm ... one?” Lord Bolton burst out laughing. “Did I guess right?”

“Not quite,” John admitted, who hadn’t actually bothered holding up a hand at all. “I think you’ve had a bit too much, My Lord.”

“Nonsense!” Lord Bolton tried to walk around John’s table, heading straight to the bar. “Never a thing as too much ale, and you shall join us, my friend.” John retook his seat and bristled at the use of ‘my friend’. He didn’t want to be Lord Bolton’s friend at all. “Innkeeper, more ales!” he demanded, striking what he clearly thought was the end of the bar, but was actually another stranger’s table.

John turned his head away in clear embarrassment, finding the whole behaviour abhorrent.

*Emma cannot marry such a man. He is no gentleman.*

“Where have we met?” Lord Bolton was back, suddenly, swaying once again in front of John.

“My Lord, come back and regale us of your tales in Bath?” a gentleman behind him with the main hunting party called. “Your uncle tells me you have nearly won your own little hunt.”

John’s eyebrows shot up at this phrase, wondering what was meant by it at all.

“In a minute.” Lord Bolton waved in his friend’s direction. “I’m just talking to ...” He waved at John. When he said nothing, Lord Bolton made an appearance of leaning down toward him and pretending to lower his voice. “This is the point where you say your name.”

John had no wish to give it.

“I think it would be much more interesting to

see if you can remember it, My Lord.” John offered a small smile that prompted Lord Bolton to laugh heartily.

“A game? Well, I like a good game, especially when I’m this drunk.” He reached out for a chair nearby and tried to draw it out to sit with John. The first swipe he made with his hand missed the chair entirely, as did the second. It was so far off that he nearly fell over and headbutted the table. He might well have done had John not kicked the chair back a little, putting it within Lord Bolton’s reach at last. “You know, I could have sworn that chair moved of its own accord then?”

“Well, you certainly have had quite a lot,” John remarked, shifting uncomfortably at the idea. He didn’t have a problem with a gentleman enjoying a drink now and then or even having a little more than a tipples when on such things as a hunting trip, but this was in public. Lord Bolton was not only in front of his friends but other strangers and gentlemen. The whole attitude to decorum or propriety

had been left at the door and seemingly abandoned.

*This is atrocious behaviour.*

John's mind was flickering with different images and pictures; all of them had Emma in them. In some, she was being left at home alone while her new husband, Lord Bolton, went off drinking and gambling with other men before ending up in a ditch somewhere, passed out. In other pictures, he could see Emma at home when drunken Lord Bolton arrived. In his stupor, he was practically falling on Emma, and she had to put up with it.

*That is not the life Emma deserves.*

“How much have you had?” John asked, watching as Lord Bolton seemed to struggle to



find the chair's seat at all.

“A few, that’s all.” Lord Bolton smiled and tried to sit straight, though he had to clamp his fingers onto the table as he tipped sideways once more. “I am here to celebrate and enjoy myself. What better way is there for a gentleman to enjoy himself than to get drunk?”

“Hmm,” John didn’t answer because he could think of many ways to answer the question. “What are you celebrating?”

“A successful hunt, of course.” Lord Bolton smiled, just as one of his friends appeared at his side and pushed a brandy glass towards him.

“Brandy, Bolton, drink up,” the man said. “I want to hear about your other hunt.” He went

to practically sit in the same chair John was sat in. John had to hitch his chair to the side, so far that the stranger collided with the table beside them instead. John looked around at the inn, suddenly embarrassed in case anyone else thought he was a part of the awful hunting group.

“My other hunt?” Lord Bolton repeated with a kind of leering smile. “Oh, I’m nearly there, good man. So nearly there. Just the question has to be asked and then the night set, then ... she’ll be mine.”

“She?” John repeated, his ears perking at this information. “What kind of hunt is this?”

“Oh, listen up, my friend.” Lord Bolton leaned across the table and beckoned John to listen closely. John was repulsed by the stench of the alcohol emanating off Lord Bolton, but he was determined to know the answer to his question, so he leaned in regardless. “This is a

hunt, not for an animal. No deer in the park, nor hare in the fields.”

“Ha! Not quite the same, is it?” The stranger now sitting askew on the table beside John added to the conversation.

“No,” Lord Bolton agreed with a severe shake of his head until he grabbed his head and held it still, as though the dizzying sensation had grown too great from it. “For a woman is much more difficult prey to catch.”

“A woman?” John said the word a little shakily now. As Lord Bolton reached out to take the brandy glass from the table and take another gulp, John couldn’t wait for his answer. Instead, he looped a finger around the slim neck at the bottom of the glass and slid it out of Lord Bolton’s reach. “What woman would that be?”

Lord Bolton looked astonished that his glass had taken a trip across the table, so much so that he leaned across the table on an elbow, trying to reach it once again.

“Just a young debutante.” He laughed, prompting the stranger beside them to chuckle too. “Beautiful thing, really so,” Lord Bolton acknowledged as he took the glass out of John’s hand and gulped half the brandy in one go. “Sweet too, though she does prattle on about the past a little too much for my liking.”

*It cannot be ...*

“Not that it will matter.” The stranger laughed once more. “Not for what you’re after.”

“True.” Lord Bolton smiled at himself, sitting proudly in the chair. “My prey is already

primed. All it needs is the question now.”

“What question?” John asked, sitting very still in his chair.

“For me to propose.” Lord Bolton shrugged as if the question were obvious.

“Then you intend to marry this debutante?” John said, leaning forward from the chair.

“Marry? Good God, no!” Lord Bolton shook his head and beckoned John to listen closer. “I am not permitted to marry freely regardless, and it is hardly what I am interested in. Take a tip from me, my friend. If a man wants a little fun with a woman, there is a surefire way to get what he wants.” He leaned in even closer and made his voice raspy as if he were trying to whisper, but the drink made it impossible. “All a man need do is propose, and her legs will

undoubtedly fall open.”

At these words, John sat back, horrified, while the stranger and Lord Bolton fell about in raucous laughter.

“Who is the young lady?” he pressed the point, needing to hear her name now. “My Lord, who is the debutante you are hunting so?”

“The Duke of Hawksby’s sister. Lady Emma Colbourne.”

## Chapter 13

John couldn't believe his ears. He didn't want to think it real at all. Perhaps this was somehow a nightmare, what he wished Lord Bolton to be rather than as he was. Yet the more he blinked, the more he realized just how real it was. For Lord Bolton just kept laughing with the stranger beside them.

“Lady Colbourne?” John asked, his voice shaky. “That’s who you’re *hunting*?” He was not afraid to hide the disgust from his voice.

“That it is.” Lord Bolton finished what was left in the brandy glass before staring over the rim at John. “Do you know, I’m sure we have met somewhere before.” He tipped his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. “Care to refresh my memory, my friend?”

John was not so eager to have Lord Bolton recognize him now.

“Another time, perhaps.” John stood to his feet, no longer interested in food. The only thing he wanted was to be away from Lord Bolton and locked in his rented room for the night.

“Wait, no.” Lord Bolton jumped to his feet, blocking John’s path. It would have been only too simple for John to push the man out of the way, especially as he was swaying so much, with one leg practically in the air to keep balance. “At least give me a hint. Something I can think about.”

“A hint?” John almost scoffed, doubting from how drunk Lord Bolton was that he’d even manage to recall this conversation the next day. “We have met somewhere recently, My



Lord. That is the only hint you'll have. If you'll excuse me, I am going to retire for the night."

When Lord Bolton didn't move out of the way, but only narrowed his eyes further, John had had enough. He took Lord Bolton's shoulder and steered him to the side before hurrying out of the bar area and up the stairs towards his room.

With each step he made on the staircase, his thoughts were becoming clearer and clearer. He couldn't let this happen. Not to Emma. She had to be told at once what was happening, so she didn't give herself to a man like *that*.

He hurried into his room, being certain to lock the door behind him, and pulled out parchment and ink provided in the rooms. Using just the light of one candle, he worked quickly, putting together a simple letter to warn her of what he had heard that night. The moment he sat back to read it, he realized

with horror how wrong it was and screwed it up into a ball.

A light tap on the door alerted him to someone's presence, and he went to open the door.

"Some food for you, Your Grace." The innkeeper smiled good-naturedly. "I saw you made your escape from our rather unsavoury hunting party and thought you might like to enjoy this in your room instead."

"That is kind; thank you." John took the tray only too gladly from the innkeeper before his gaze rested on the screwed-up parchment. "I would like to send a letter by express tonight if you know of a messenger nearby?"

"Of course, Your Grace, where to?" the innkeeper asked.

“To Bath.”

“No problem. I will arrange it at once. Bring the letter down whenever you’re ready.” The innkeeper smiled and left him in peace again.

As John picked at the mutton pie he’d been provided, he turned his eyes on a fresh piece of parchment, his mind working quickly at what to say. He could just reveal what he had heard, but the particulars of it were too awful to commit to writing. No, he would have to save that information to tell Emma in person instead.

*Then, what do I write?*

His mind went back to all that Peter had said,

telling him that Emma could hardly choose between him and Lord Bolton when she had no idea how he felt.

*It's time she knew.*

To John's amazement, he paused with the food, pulled the parchment towards himself, and began to pour his heart out on the letter. When he was finished, he was quite convinced it was too much, that when she read it, she might well be horrified and throw it in the fire. Either it was the ale that accompanied his dinner that gave him the confidence to send it, or it was the memory of seeing how foul a man Lord Bolton was and not wishing Emma to end up with him. Either way, he sealed the letter with wax and hurried downstairs soon after to place it into the innkeeper's hand.

"We'll send it at once," the innkeeper said, turning to place the letter in an express messenger's hands. The man nodded and took

his leave quickly, hurrying out to his horse beyond.

John had made up his mind to rise early and head to Bath as soon as he could, with the dawn light, but at least this way, his letter would arrive before him. That way, if Lord Bolton intended to go to Emma the next day and propose, the letter would hopefully beat him there and make her think twice about accepting it.

Before John could retreat back upstairs to bed, he heard Lord Bolton and his friends jeering once again from inside the bar, making him cringe.

“If I may.” John turned back to the innkeeper, eager to do one last thing before he retired. “Keep an eye on Lord Bolton for me.” He offered the innkeeper a few coins for the trouble. “If he mentions a Lady Colbourne again, I wish to know about it.”

“Very well.” The innkeeper nodded and took the coins.

“Do you know when the hunting party intends to leave?” John asked, wary of the answer.

“Sometime tomorrow morning, Your Grace,” the innkeeper answered. “Though judging by how quickly they’re getting through my ale and brandy store, I doubt it will be early.”

“I am sure you’re right.” John nodded, hoping to find comfort in the idea. Yet as he retreated up to his chamber, looking back down at the bar more than once, he couldn’t help his mind dwelling on the letter he had just written.

It was the ultimate gamble, laying out his

heart for Emma to read purely on parchment alone. He just had to hope she would take it with full seriousness and give him a chance before she accepted Lord Bolton's offer.

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"Who are you waiting for?" Arthur's voice made Emma jump as she stood by the drawing room window.

"Anne," Emma explained, turning to look out the glass another time.

"She's coming again?" Arthur sat up straighter in his seat. "You've seen her every day this week."

"You seem rather happy about it, though; I

must say,” Emma teased with a smile, watching as Arthur narrowed his glare at her before returning his gaze to his paper.

“Enough, Emma,” he said quietly. “I simply respect your friend, that is all.”

“Of course, you do.” Emma nodded, thinking back to the day before spent largely in the garden. Not long after Anne had arrived, Arthur made an appearance and never left their side. It hadn’t escaped Emma’s notice how Arthur seemed to enjoy Anne’s jesting nature very much. In fact, more so than Emma had ever seen any other gentleman. They were constantly laughing together, with Arthur chuckling so heartily that sometimes he let out the smallest of snorts, much to Anne’s amusement, who then teased him mercilessly for it.

“She’s just ...” Arthur paused, keeping his gaze on the newspaper in his lap. “Different to



other debutantes.”

“She is,” Emma agreed, watching her brother over her shoulder. “For one thing, she’s not so worried about constantly saying the right thing. She seems to prefer making life enjoyable instead.”

“Exactly,” Arthur agreed with a nod. “She’s pleasant company to be around. That is all.”

“I’ve always thought Anne was rather pretty too,” Emma said, smirking as she watched her brother for a reaction.

“She has her charms,” he said quietly, still not lifting his gaze from the newspaper. Though, he did now raise the paper as though to block out the sight of Emma completely.

“It is a shame about her position, though,” Emma went on, eager to get a rise out of her brother.

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked, his voice coming from behind the paper now held very still.

“I mean, her mother is so insistent that she marry and marry quickly.”

“She is?” The paper in front of Arthur crinkled slightly with the words.

“Oh yes,” Emma said, sitting on the windowsill as she pushed him ever further. “In fact, she’s even insisting that Anne give Mr Hamilton another chance.”

“Hamilton!?” Arthur said, his voice holding a note of outrage as the paper suddenly collapsed on his lap.

“That was a strong reaction,” Emma said, trying to stifle a giggle.

“It wasn’t,” he said quickly, trying to flatten out the creases in the paper he had just made. “It’s just ...” he paused for a second, clearly thinking through his words, “they do not suit one another.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that Mr Hamilton wouldn’t know how to laugh if Miss Braithwaite were to perform an entire skit in front of him,” he shook his head boldly. “She should be with a man who enjoys her good sense of humor. Not someone

as dull as Mr Hamilton.”

“And who does enjoy her good sense of humour?” Emma felt how mischievous her smile was now as Arthur paused with the paper and looked up to her, bearing a full-on glower.

“I’m sure there are many a gentleman.”

She was rather disappointed in his answer and turned her focus beyond the windows instead, looking out for Anne’s arrival again. She had actually orchestrated Anne’s visit that day more for her brother than for herself. With one particular aim in mind.

“Anne’s mother expects her to make an *eligible* match.” She stressed the word, listening behind her as the crinkling of the paper fell still.

“I see,” Arthur said, the words coming slowly. “Well, as she should. I suppose Mr Hamilton is an eligible match for someone in Anne’s position.”

“Then if he were to propose again, you would think it a good thing if Anne accepted?” Emma asked, listening as the paper was suddenly dropped onto a table.

“That man should not be married to Anne,” he said abruptly and jumped to his feet, striding quickly towards the window.

“Why not?” Emma asked. “I thought you were all in favour of eligible matches?”

“I ... I am,” Arthur said, the words coming

stuttered. “Naturally, I am. It’s just that eligible doesn’t always mean happy.”

Emma chewed on these words for a minute, not knowing how to respond as she thought of her and Lord Bolton. An eligible match indeed, but she had no idea if it could be a happy one or not.

“Who’s that?” Arthur asked, pointing beyond the window. Emma looked out, seeing a man astride a horse riding as fast as possible down the street. He came to a halt so suddenly beyond their door that the horse reared back on its hind legs, kicking up at the front. “Well, it’s certainly an entrance to make.”

“Is it a messenger?” Emma asked. In answer to her question, the man managed to control his horse and urged the mare to drop her front legs again. Once settled, he jumped down from the horse and delved into a pocket, pulling out what appeared to be a rather thick letter, with

more than one page of parchment.

“He’s eager.” Arthur laughed as he walked towards the entrance hall, leaving Emma to peer out of the front window. She watched as the messenger bounded up to the front door, opened by the butler, who hurriedly passed the letter over. As the messenger retreated to his horse and went on his way, she heard murmurs in the entrance hall, followed by Arthur’s reappearance.

“Someone wished very desperately to send you a fast letter then,” Emma said, pointing out of the window. “I have never seen a messenger ride so fast.”

“It is not for me,” Arthur said and held up the letter, earning her gaze. “It is for you.”

She stared at the letter, startled by it in

Arthur's hand, seeing her name written elegantly across the front of the parchment.

"And *this* ..." he paused and turned the letter over for her to see the wax seal. "Is John's seal."

"Is it?" She pretended ignorance as she took the letter from him. In truth, she'd recognize that seal anywhere.

"He must have something eager to say to you, for that is quite a letter," Arthur said, watching her closely.

On one hand, she was desperate to rip into it. On the other, she did not want Arthur standing so close while she did. Fortunately, her prayers were answered as Anne's carriage arrived at that moment.



“I should see Anne –” Emma went to move around her brother.

“Let me,” he smiled, blocking her path. “I’ll show her into the garden where we can have tea set up. You read your letter and join us when you’re ready.” He was already eagerly turning towards the door, hurrying to meet Anne.

“Remember to keep the housekeeper with you to chaperone while you are alone,” Emma warned in a teasing tone.

“Behave, Emma,” he said sharply before hurrying out of the drawing room and closing the door behind him.

She couldn’t help laughing before she turned

and retook a perch on the window seat and opened the letter.

The first thing that struck her about John's letter was the address at the top of the page.

*Dearest Emma,*

No Lady Colbourne, no title at all, but Emma! Words she had longed for him to say. Her gaze hurried on to read the rest.

*I know after my recent behaviour towards you that this letter will not only be a surprise but indeed a great shock. Suffice it to say that I never wished to be committing such feelings down in a letter. In fact, when I imagined speaking of them at all, I thought of it in person, yet what I experienced this evening has made it imperative that I speak to you now, before you accept a proposal from Lord Bolton.*

She broke off suddenly, her mind tarrying along the word *proposal*. Lord Bolton hadn't yet proposed. She sat further back in the window seat, hurrying to read the letter as quickly as possible.

*First, I will apologize to you for my behaviour at the Bath Assembly. When your brother suggested we dance together and I refused, I need you to know the true reason why I declined. It was far from not wanting to dance with you. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was from a fear that if I did dance with you, then after all these years, I might actually confess how deeply I did want to dance with you.*

*My steward has pointed out to me this week that maybe I have just been making excuses for hiding these feelings from you. After much thought, I have concluded he is right.*

*We have grown up knowing each other, and while each day that I knew you, you convinced me more and more that there is no finer woman on this earth, it also convinced me that you were beyond my reach. That if I were ever to declare what I felt for you, I would have to suffer the heartbreak of rejection.*

*I refused to dance with you at the assembly rooms because I was afraid. That was the simple truth. Afraid that if I danced with you and capitulated to those feelings, I would have to suffer that heartbreak I have been afraid of for so long.*

*Now, I will confess the whole truth to you, Emma. I have cared for you for many years. I do believe that it was in place long before you went to finishing school and I to university. When I saw you again at the assembly rooms, it brought into focus that my care for you has long been something deeper. I am in love with you.*

*Any coldness or distance you have seen on my part was my feeble attempt to protect my own heart; it was never meant to offend you.*

*I declare this to you now for two reasons. The first is that I fear you are to accept the proposal of another, and I need you to know how I feel before you make that decision. The second is that I know the proposal that will be made to you by Lord Bolton is simply a trick and has no real feeling in it.*

*I overheard Lord Bolton this evening talking with some friends of his about you. I cannot repeat the words here, for they are too shocking to even contemplate writing. When I see you next, I will tell you in person everything that he said.*

*I intend to set off from the inn first thing in the morning and will make my way to you. I hope this letter will arrive ahead of me to beat any possible proposal that could come from Lord Bolton first.*

*I beg of you, do not accept yet. Speak to me first, for there is much more I want to say. I know my recent behaviour hardly deserves your kindness or your patience, but I beg you for it on my knees.*

*Wait for me to get to Bath and speak to you first.*

*Yours, forever,*

*John.*

## Chapter 14

Emma was in shock after reading the letter.

“He ... he loves me?” she muttered aloud, reading it a second time before she could allow herself to believe it. It didn’t make sense to her, no matter how many times she read the letter. John was a duke and a fine man; why did he ever think she would reject him so?

She couldn’t deal with this alone. She jumped to her feet, and with shaking hands, she clung onto the letter and hurried through the house, heading for the garden. When she stepped outside, she found Arthur sat around a small table with Anne, the housekeeper sitting close behind them as a chaperone. Between them, there was tea set up.

“Here she is.” Anne smiled as Emma stepped out. “Now, I am sure your sister will agree with me, Your Grace.”

“That remains to be seen,” Arthur said with a smile, leaning over the chair arm towards Anne. Ordinarily, Emma would have marvelled at how close her brother was to her friend, but her mind couldn’t think of it now. “Emma? Is something wrong?”

Emma could say nothing; she just walked forward, feeling how violently her hands were now trembling.

“You’re pale.” Anne placed her teacup on the table and jumped to her feet. “Good lord, Emma, you look as though you will faint any moment. Come, sit down.”



Emma let her friend steer her towards the table and placed her in the chair. As Anne fussed and poured out a cup of tea for Emma to drink, she just kept staring at her brother, trying to think of something to say.

“What is it, Emma? Has something happened?” he asked, pointing down at her trembling hands that held the letter. “What did John say?”

“He said –” She broke off, swallowing suddenly. “I don’t know how to say it.” She shook her head abruptly and thought of the next best thing. “You read it.” She proffered the letter to him.

“Emma, it’s addressed to you. It’s private. I can’t do that.” He shook his head and placed a hand on her wrist, clearly trying to calm her trembling hands.

“But I want you to,” she pleaded with him. “Do not think of it as reading the private thoughts of your friend for a minute; think of it as helping me instead. For I do not know what to make of it.” She felt tears prick the backs of her eyes as she fumbled and pressed the letter into his hands.

Arthur accepted the letter slowly, evidently exchanging a worried glance with Anne as he did so.

“Emma, here, drink this.” Anne pressed a sweet tea into Emma’s grasp. “It will help.” Emma nodded and hurried to drink the tea. Anne pulled her chair up to Emma’s side and entwined their hands together. “You’re cold too.”

“I’m just in shock,” Emma rushed to explain. “I didn’t expect him to say ... *that*.” She gestured down to the letter again.

She couldn't make head nor tail of it. He loved her. He said that he loved her. It went so far against what she expected he thought of her that she was struggling to believe it.

She looked to Arthur, needing his opinion, but he was still reading it. The more she watched Arthur, the more she saw his face set into a frown, and the letter lowered a little in his hand. Up until he was finished with it and laid it flat on the table.

“Well?” Emma asked him. “What do you think?”

“What do you mean, what do I think?” Arthur asked softly. “Are you asking if I believe him?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.” She took the letter quickly and pressed it into Anne’s hands too.

“Emma, I couldn’t,” Anne tried to push the letter away. “This is private to you.”

“I would only repeat every single word to you anyway,” Emma rushed to explain. “It is easier if you read it for yourself.” Anne nodded slowly and took the letter, just as Emma returned her focus to Arthur. “Do you believe him?”

“I do,” Arthur said without hesitation, sitting back in his chair.

“What?” Emma watched her brother closely, startled by how calmly he was accepting this news. “You do not seem wholly surprised.”

“In truth,” he shrugged, “I’m not.”

“I do not think I have ever been so confused!” Emma placed her teacup back in its saucer loudly, making it clink around them. “Why aren’t you surprised?”

“Because John’s behaviour was very odd while he was staying with us,” Arthur began slowly, the words coming with care. “When Lord Bolton came to visit you, John could barely take his eyes away from the two of you. He also warned me again and again about accepting Lord Bolton as a suitable suitor for you. It all seemed odd when I know there could be no real objection to Lord Bolton.”

“What do you mean?” Emma asked quietly.

“I mean, when I knew Lord Bolton to be an

eligible match, John had to be objecting to the match for another reason altogether,” Arthur pointed out, picking up his own teacup. “There was also the incident that happened when you and Lord Bolton were sat here together in the drawing room. The moment he took your hand, John dropped his saucer and smashed it, didn’t he? Have you ever known John to be so clumsy?”

She couldn’t answer. She was wracking her brains to think of a time where he had been, but she could not.

“It would also explain what you describe as John’s warm and cold behaviour towards you, wouldn’t it?” Arthur asked, taking the letter back just as Anne finished reading it. “The warm is when he loses himself and just enjoys your company, the cold is when he’s retreating.”

“But ...” Emma turned her gaze on Anne. “I

just thought he didn't like me. At the assembly, I could have sworn he didn't like me."

"A man nervous of an enthusiastic answer is more likely to guard his own heart first, isn't he?" Anne said with thought. "It could make sense."

"Keeping it a secret for so long makes sense, too," Arthur agreed, lowering the letter back down to the table.

"What do you mean?" Emma asked, reaching for her teacup again.

"I mean that if he was always afraid of you rejecting him, that is not the end of the matter, is it?" Arthur gestured to himself. "John and I are friends. When we see each other, he'd undoubtedly have to see you again,

and go through the fresh heartbreak all over again, each time. Keeping it a secret makes perfect sense to me.”

Emma thought carefully of her brother’s words on secrecy, especially when she saw his eyes flick in Anne’s direction.

“A man afraid of rejection would surely be backed into a corner now,” Arthur continued. “When it’s possible you’ll marry another.”

“But Lord Bolton hasn’t even proposed yet,” Emma said boldly.

“Emma ...” Anne took her hand another time, pressing their palms together in comfort. “We have all seen you together. No one who has seen you could doubt the man’s affection or intention.”



“I suppose.” She nodded and chewed her lip in thought. “What do you make of what John says about Lord Bolton?”

“There I’m afraid I must disagree with my friend,” Arthur said, almost painfully as he picked up the letter again. “I respect John in many ways; you know that. Yet I also know that a jealous man’s word cannot be taken for gospel.”

Emma sat perfectly still, trying to take the words in, though she struggled with it.

“You think he is lying about Lord Bolton?” Anne asked, reaching over and taking the letter from him. Emma saw the way Anne’s and Arthur’s fingers brushed together with the movement. Arthur seemed to jolt with the touch, and a certain blush filled his cheeks. “Your Grace?” Anne prompted him on;

apparently, she hadn't noticed.

"I think it very likely," he said after clearing his throat. "The first thing a jealous man would do is disparage his contender."

"I suppose you would know," Emma murmured quietly, thinking of the scene she had witnessed earlier when Arthur had insulted Mr Hamilton so. Arthur offered her a dark glare, clearly warning her to be quiet.

"What was that?" Anne asked, looking at Emma.

"Nothing," Emma explained quickly, shaking her head. "So, you think John is lying and that we should ignore this remark about Lord Bolton?"

“I’m afraid I think we should.” Arthur leaned forward, his face implacable. “No matter what John says, Lord Bolton is still a match for you that would be –”

“Eligible, I know,” Emma said the word before her brother could.

“The true question is,” Anne passed the letter back to Emma. “Which do you prefer?”

“What?” Emma asked, startled so much that she nearly cut herself on the parchment.

“Your friend is asking how you feel after reading John’s letter,” Arthur continued. “Are you happy?”

“I’m ...” Emma looked between the two of them before setting her gaze back on the parchment. She answered honestly. “Confused.”

“My Lady?” The butler’s voice interrupted the three of them. Emma turned in her seat, looking around to the butler who had appeared behind them in the doorway. “You have a visitor waiting for you in the drawing room.”

“A visitor?” She clutched the letter, feeling certain it was John waiting for her.

“Lord Bolton,” the butler explained. Emma’s heart sank slightly, though she tried not to show it on her face.

“We best go greet him.” Arthur stood to his feet.

“Your Grace,” the butler turned to address him. “Lord Bolton has asked if he may have a private audience with Lady Colbourne.”

Silence followed this statement, in which Emma just fiddled with the parchment in her hands. Anne was the one to break the silence.

“I think that proposal is not so far off now,” she said with a smirk, nodding towards Emma.

“Arthur, you will come, won’t you?” Emma jumped to her feet and took her brother’s arm.

“Heavens no.” Arthur shook his head. “He asked for a private audience; you must go alone.” Then he turned to the butler. “Would you please act as chaperone? Though clearly,

Lord Bolton is asking for privacy, so make it at some distance.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The butler nodded. As he turned to walk away, Emma felt her brother nudge her in the back, urging her to walk forward.

Shakily, she walked into the house, aware that her trembling had not stopped yet. If anything, it had just grown worse. As she neared the drawing room, she realized she was still clutching John’s letter tightly in her hands. She hurried to fold it up and hid it in a pocket in her gown, intending to mask it from Lord Bolton’s view. As she reached the drawing room door, the butler was waiting beside it, expecting her to nod in assent.

“I am ready,” she nodded to the butler, and he stepped in.

“Lady Colbourne, My Lord.” The butler bowed and retreated to the far side of the room, busying himself with tidying at a distance and chaperoning from afar.

“My Lord.” Emma curtsied the moment she saw Lord Bolton. He did not bother with the formality. Instead, he strode quickly across the room and reached for her hands. She was astonished by the sudden press of their bare fingers together.

“Emma, every minute away from you has dragged.” His charming words missed the mark, but she recognized the kindness in them and summoned a smile to her cheeks.

“You are too kind,” she said, watching his smile closely. He looked a little more tired than normal, with heavy bags under his eyes. “This is a surprise visit; to what do I owe the pleasure?” she asked, retracting her hands

from his and walking around him. She made her way to the ornate settee on the far side of the room and took a seat.

“A question of urgency,” he said and sat down beside her. This close, their legs were touching one another. She retreated away across the settee, trying to put distance there, but he merely moved forward again. She gave up trying to escape and pinned a smile to her cheeks, trying not to appear so uncomfortable.

“What question would that be?” She pretended innocence.

“One that will affect us both for the rest of our lives,” he said, his smile growing.

She could see it coming now, just how right Anne had been about the impending proposal. The weight of John’s letter in her pocket felt



increasingly heavy, so much so that she had to stop him from saying the words. By any means.

“Before you ask your question,” she interrupted him, just as he opened his mouth to speak to her. “Let us talk of something else instead.”

“Such as what?” He appeared startled, his eyebrows rising. She knew it was absurd, but she was clutching at straws and searched desperately for a topic.

“The concert tomorrow evening,” she explained with a smile, trying to brush over the awkwardness. “I know we have already talked about it, but I wish to speak a little more of it first.”

“That is hardly necessary,” he said with a

chuckle.

“It is,” she pleaded.

“Emma, I cannot wait any longer.” He reached for her hand. As soon as his fingers touched hers, she felt how overwhelming the moment was. He was about to ask her; meanwhile, she held another man’s declaration of love in her pocket. A declaration she had long wished to be true, yet now it had been made, she didn’t know how to take it.

“First,” she pulled her hand free and jumped to her feet. “Let me order something for us to drink.” She crossed the room to the butler. “Perhaps some tea for our guest?”

“Of course, My Lady.” The butler moved towards the door to call one of the maids.

“That is really not necessary,” Lord Bolton murmured, chuckling under his breath as he sat back on the settee. “I am not thirsty.”

“I am,” she lied, “and I would not be so poor a host as to leave you without refreshment.” She knew she was making something of a fool of herself but didn’t care. She just wanted to delay this moment for as long as possible, maybe even stop it altogether.

Once the butler had arranged the tea with the maid, they were left alone again, and silence descended.

Lord Bolton tapped the seat beside him, clearly beckoning Emma to join him. She smiled demurely and took a seat opposite him across the room that prompted him to chuckle.

“Your modesty does you great credit, Emma.” He stood and crossed the room towards her, making her shift in her seat.

“Thank you,” she said, moving her hand to feel the letter in her pocket before releasing it and giving her full focus to Lord Bolton. She was trying to think of John’s words, but the more she thought of them, the more she realized that John didn’t exactly express an intent to marry her. He just clearly intended to stop her from marrying Lord Bolton. The two things were not quite the same.

“I must apologize,” Lord Bolton said, taking hold of a footstool and dragging it in front of Emma before sitting on it. The move brought them close together, and she sat back in her chair slightly. “I have no such modesty in me, and I find it especially difficult to hold onto such things when I’m looking at you.”

“You are really too kind, My Lord,” she hurried to say, though his compliment left her feeling his charm was too thick at times. She rather wished he would be more sparing with it.

“Not at all,” he said smiling. “In fact, I do not think I can wait any longer, and I must ask my question now.”

She opened her mouth to object again and was relieved when someone else interrupted for her. A gentle tap on the door revealed the maid waiting there to bring in tea. The butler helped the maid set up the tea on a nearby coffee table. In the ensuing silence, Emma could feel Lord Bolton’s eyes on her, staring at her intently. She offered him a brief smile before feigning interest in the tea.

Once the maid was bustled out of the room, and the butler retreated to a distance once again, Lord Bolton reached for both of her

hands.

“My Lord!” She gasped at the sheer energy in the action, for he pulled her forward so that she was sitting on the chair’s very edge so that she could fall practically into his lap at any moment.

“I fear I cannot wait any longer,” he whispered in a rush. “Forget all these interruptions and delays, Emma.”

“I –” she went to interrupt again, but he spoke over her.

“Since I have met you, I have not thought of anyone else. You are on my mind every day, most minutes in fact.” He laughed, as though amazed at himself. “It has left me without a doubt that there is but one person in this life who could make me happy.”

He paused now, but Emma was lost for words. She could no longer delay him asking the question. She was trapped and just had to let him say it. "Would you do me the honour, no, the privilege and the blessing, of putting me out of this misery of just longing for you?" His eyes were wide as he leaned towards her a little more. There was barely any distance between them now. "Consent to be my wife, Emma. I beg of you."

## Chapter 15

When John opened his eyes, it was abrupt, as though he had suddenly realized for just how long he had been asleep. He threw off the covers and reached for the pocket watch he had laid beside him on the bedside table. The sun streaming through the windows was quite high in the sky, leaving him to suspect that much of the morning had already passed. The pocket watch confirmed his suspicion. It had already gone eleven o'clock.

*I overslept!*

He bundled out of bed as fast as he could, hurrying to dress as quickly as possible. He'd intended to rise with dawn and reach Bath before midday, yet clearly, his exhaustion had taken its toll on him. He'd been up late into the night, pacing the room and second-



guessing the letter he had sent to Emma. The other part of him had been tempted to return downstairs and have it out with Lord Bolton to demand why on earth he thought he could get away with treating Emma in such a fashion.

The pacing and the whirring thoughts had meant he didn't get to sleep until the early hours of the morning. By the time he had laid his head upon the pillow, dawn hadn't been too far away. That was what had caused him to oversleep.

He cursed his own foolishness as he hurried back and forth across the room. By the time he was dressed and had packed the small bag he'd threaded over his shoulder, it was just a few minutes later. Once ready, he pulled on his boots and hurried down the steps where he found the innkeeper walking around the bar, having just finished serving breakfast for his customers.

“Ah, Your Grace,” the innkeeper beckoned him into a corner. “You’re awake.”

“Later than intended. I must leave at once.” John was still fidgeting with the cravat to get it perfectly in place.

“You remember you asked me to keep an eye on Lord Bolton, Your Grace?”

“Yes.” John nodded quickly, looking around to see if he could spy Lord Bolton at all taking breakfast. To his surprise, he couldn’t see anyone at all from the hunting party. Though the remnants of their late-night drinking could be seen, with tankards and brandy glasses along the bar that hadn’t yet been cleaned.

“He did speak of Lady Colbourne again last night.” The innkeeper’s words made John fall still. His entire body turned cold with fear at

the thought of what the innkeeper would say next.

“What did he say?” John asked, nervous about the answer.

“More of what I believe you may have already heard.” The innkeeper shifted uncomfortably. “He mentioned something about intending to leave to head back to London soon, that he was staying just long enough in Bath to ... *visit* Lady Colbourne.” John cringed, knowing exactly what the innkeeper was trying to say politely. “His friends only seemed to spur him on.”

John shuddered at the thought. One man like Lord Bolton was bad enough, but an entire cohort of gentlemen who would encourage such deceit and behaviour was disgusting to him.

There was no chance he was going to allow Lord Bolton to do this to Emma. He was willfully not only trying to take advantage of her and damage her heart, but he would also ruin her reputation and any chance she had of wanting a good marriage. To John's mind, there was no word bad enough to describe how selfish Lord Bolton's actions were.

"I must go, now." John began to walk towards the door, but the innkeeper was following him.

"There's another thing you should know, Your Grace," the innkeeper said, reaching him at the door.

"Yes?"

"Lord Bolton left first thing this morning." The

innkeeper's words brought John up short. He hadn't believed it possible, for Lord Bolton had been so out of it the night before. "He left looking worse for the wear but seemed intent on going. I believe he was heading straight for the young lady's house in question. I happened to overhear him speaking to one of his friends."

"Thank you. Now I really must go." John nodded and pushed out of the door as quickly as possible, running around the inn to reach the stable. There, the stable boy was unprepared for his appearance, and it took much longer than he had hoped to see the horse saddled and prepared to go.

As soon as he could, he pinned his bag to the horse's saddle and mounted quickly before riding away down the track road. He went as fast as he could, determined to reach Bath and head straight to Emma's door.

He didn't care if Lord Bolton were already there; he would push past him now in his effort to reach Emma and beg her not to accept Lord Bolton's proposal.

The faster he rode, the more the wind bristled in his hair and clothes. Each thud of the horse's hooves against the ground made him angrier for working himself to such exhaustion that he had overslept. If only he'd managed to rouse at dawn like he'd intended, then maybe he would have been able to reach Emma's door first.

By the time he reached Bath, he was exhausted, sweating, and heated in the face, though he hardly cared. He just concentrated on riding between the traffic, slipping in the small gaps between carriages, carts, and other horses. More than once, he heard a driver call out to him to slow down, but he didn't care. He just pushed on as fast as possible.

The only time he slowed was when he could see the part of Bath on the horizon where he knew Emma's house was. The slant of the hills made it visible, though still far away.

It would be an hour at least until he reached her door.

He kicked the horse forward again, determined he wouldn't let up another time until he had reached her door.

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"I ..." Emma parted her lips to answer, but without knowing what to say, no sound came out. Lord Bolton just continued to stare at her, with her hands in his.

“What do you say, Emma? Marry me?” he asked again, pushing the question.

“I ...” she began again before clearing her throat. She couldn’t answer, not right now. That knowledge gave her what words to say. “I need some time, My Lord.”

“Time?” he repeated, one eyebrow just lifting in question.

“To think about my answer,” she said.

“Yes, of course.” He smiled fully, as though she had said yes and not ‘maybe’ at all. He lifted both of her hands to his face and kissed the backs, one at a time. She was too numb to even think about removing her hands from his; she just let it happen instead, not knowing what else to do. “I will wait for your answer, and I will wait with anticipation.”



“Th-thank you,” she stuttered, trying to return his smile, but struggling with it.

“I must speak to your brother at once.” He leapt to his feet and released her hands.

“My brother?” she repeated in shock, but Lord Bolton was already by the door, preparing to leave.

“Of course,” he flung the door open.

*But ... I haven't said yes yet. We do not need Arthur's blessing yet!*

She hurried to her feet with the effort of trying

to stop him from speaking to Arthur at all.

“Ah, there you are, Your Grace.” Lord Bolton’s words made her body stiffen, for it seemed she was too late and could not stop him in time. She reached for the now open doorway, startled to see Arthur and Anne standing in the middle of the entrance hall, as though they had been trying to listen in. She frowned at the idea.

“Here I am,” Arthur said, smiling, clearly already knowing why Lord Bolton was so happy to find him there.

“May I beg a moment alone with you?” Lord Bolton asked.

“Of course, this way. We’ll head to my study.” Arthur beckoned him to follow towards the study.

Emma just clung to the doorframe beside her, watching on with her jaw dropped at everything that was happening. She said nothing. She couldn't even look back at Anne straight away, not until the door of the study closed and the muffled noises of Lord Bolton and Arthur speaking began.

“Well?” Anne said, walking towards her. “What did you say?”

Emma couldn't answer. She took Anne's hand and, while casting wary glances back to the study door, she dragged her back out to the garden, needing that peace and privacy for a moment.

The second they stepped outside, Emma released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She also felt her throat constrict, with

tightness and the threat of tears. She flung herself down into the chair beside the table full of tea and hung her head forward, despairing as Anne bustled around her, coming to kneel by her side.

“You do not look happy,” Anne said carefully. “Actually, you appear to be even more in despair than I was after Mr Hamilton proposed. Do I take it that you refused Lord Bolton, then?”

“No, I did not.” Emma looked up from where she had dropped her head, connecting her gaze with Anne, whose eyes widened.

“You said yes?” she asked, her voice notched high with amazement.

“I didn’t say that either.” Emma shook her head. “I just asked for more time. I didn’t

know what to say, so I asked for time to think about it.”

“How odd.” Anne moved to a chair beside her. “Lord Bolton looked so happy that I was quite convinced you had said yes.”

“He seemed to think it was a yes.” Emma sighed and sat back in her chair, struggling to understand what had just occurred. “I cannot believe I haven’t even given my answer, and he has already gone to Arthur to ask for his blessing!”

“Emma.” Anne’s gentle voice urged her to look back to her friend. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know!” Emma said loudly and jumped to her feet. She placed a hand to her chest, feeling how fast and heavy it was beating. Her emotions were in turmoil. She’d gone from

reading one letter and a man's declaration of love to facing a proposal from another man.

In her heart, she knew exactly which man she preferred, but he had not proposed, and she was so confused by him, she almost didn't know whether to believe his words or not.

A sound at the house's entrance made her flick her head to the side, finding Arthur standing there with crossed arms.

"Well? What did you say to him?" she asked Arthur. "Did you give your blessing?"

"I did." Arthur nodded. "As I'm certain our mother would. He's a fine match. Very –"

"Eligible, yes, I know!" Emma threw her hands

up in the air, fed up with hearing that word spoken so much. “So, you said yes?”

“I said yes.” Arthur nodded. “The question is, did you? Your suitor was not exactly clear on what your response was.”

“I ... didn’t say anything really,” Emma rushed to explain. “I just said I’d think about it.”

“Well, this is a to do.” Arthur walked past her, sighing for dramatic effect as he sat in a chair beside Anne. “Miss Braithwaite, do me a favor and top up my tea for me. After this eventful morning, I really need it.”

“Tea can solve all woes,” Anne jested with a smile as she topped up all the cups. “Emma? Do you want one?”

Emma could not be calmed so easily; she just walked in a quick circle on the spot.

“Emma?” Arthur’s voice disturbed her thoughts. “How do you feel now about the letter and your proposal?”

She couldn’t answer him.

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John was riding up the main road towards the Crescent where Emma lived when he saw a familiar carriage. It took a minute to realize why, then he caught a glimpse between the window and saw the tired face of Lord Bolton.

He was driving away from Emma’s house.



Realizing he was too late to stop the impending meeting and very likely the proposal, John pulled the horse to a sharp stop, looking back at the carriage. It was riding away from the Crescent and heading towards the town centre.

John had a choice. He could go on to see Emma now, or he could confront Lord Bolton about the night before. The latter sounded particularly appealing. Part of John thought that if Lord Bolton knew someone had cottoned onto his scheme, he would just back off.

John listened to his gut instinct and turned the horse around, heading after the carriage. Unable to cut in front of it in the busy street to make it stop, he had to follow the entire way through the carriage's journey. They curved around residential streets and narrow roads full of tall yellow-stone and Georgian houses.

The closer they got to the city centre, the busier it became, with people taking chances walking to cross the street in front of such carriages and carts.

To his surprise and dismay, when they did stop in the very heart of the town centre, he found the carriage pulled up outside a gentlemen's club. The back street was dirty, and people lingered at the side of the road staring at people's pockets; evidently their minds were on thieving rather than anything good. John turned his eyes to the club door, realizing just where Lord Bolton was heading. It was far from one of the most reputable clubs.

On the contrary, it was known to be seedy, with a dodgy reputation, known for loan sharks, gambling, cock fighting in courtyards, and prostitutes that walked the hallways.

John jumped down from his horse just as the

carriage pulled up, and Lord Bolton stepped down. He had a spring in his step as he began to hurry up the steps and a great smile on his face.

*Has he asked her already? Is that smile because she said yes?*

Fearing Lord Bolton's plan to destroy Emma's good name and take advantage of her had already begun, John called out for his attention.

"Lord Bolton?" At the call, the lord stopped walking up the steps and turned back. His eyebrows lifted slightly.

"We have met?" he asked, descending the steps again.

“More than once,” John admitted, holding the lord’s gaze strongly. Suddenly, Lord Bolton shook his head and blinked a few times.

“Forgive me. I had a lot to drink last night.” He laughed at himself, “For some reason, I feel as though I heard your voice during the evening. I must be imagining things.”

“You are not, My Lord,” John said quickly. “Do you still not remember who I am?”

Lord Bolton looked him up and down for a minute, his manner growing increasingly guarded the more he saw John’s darkening countenance.

“We met through the Duke of Hawksby, didn’t we?” he asked, eventually things sliding into place.

“We did.” John nodded. “The Duke of Pembrokeshire.”

“That’s it.” Lord Bolton laughed and clicked his fingers. “Forgive me; I am dreadful with faces. Are you saying we met last night as well?”

“We did,” John said boldly. “While you couldn’t stop talking about a mutual friend of ours. Lady Emma Colbourne.” At once, Lord Bolton’s mirth vanished.

“Ah, did I?” he asked warily.

“I am not surprised you do not remember it. You were quite in your cups.”

“Then I hope you’ll take whatever I said with a pinch of salt.”

“I have no intention of doing so,” John said unblinkingly as he watched Lord Bolton shift in his stance. “I believe you meant every word you said last night.”

“Yet, you cannot prove it, can you?” Lord Bolton smiled suddenly. It was lopsided, with something quite devilish in the smile as he stepped away. “Did you wish to warn Lady Colbourne of me, Your Grace?”

“I will not only warn Emma but everyone I meet –”

“Oh, Emma?” Lord Bolton seemed to take great joy in this moment. “You address her so?”

I'm afraid that privilege is enjoyed solely by the man who is courting Emma. That would be me. Not you, Your Grace."

"You are not betrothed yet." John curled his fingers into a fist, having to restrain himself.

"We're as good as." Lord Bolton smiled further and walked towards the steps again, heading away and into the club. "In fact, I obtained her brother's blessing this very morning."

John stumbled back at this news. His letter surely had to have arrived by now, yet still, Arthur had given his blessing to such a man as Lord Bolton. His mind was made up; he had to reveal to Arthur and Emma everything he had heard the night before with great urgency.

"It was interesting to meet you again, Your Grace," Lord Bolton said, hovering at the top

of the steps. "If your arrival here is to try and persuade me away from pursuing your friend, then you need not bother. The deal is almost done." He looked back one last time at John. "Good day to you, Your Grace."

John was dumbfounded as he watched Lord Bolton disappear into the club. Part of him wished to march into the club and demand retribution from trying to sully Emma's honour now. Yet if he called for a duel, there was no evidence to prove Lord Bolton intended to harm her honour. It would simply be John's word against his.

John backed away instead towards the horse and mounted the saddle again. If simply showing Lord Bolton that he knew of the plan wasn't going to persuade him out of going ahead, then there was only one way to protect Emma from him.

That was to go and reveal the truth to Emma



in person.

## Chapter 16

Emma looked between Anne and Arthur, her heartbeat increasing by the second.

“Emma?” Anne prompted, just as Emma began to stumble away. “Emma, it’s all right.”

“No, it’s not all right,” Emma said quickly, teetering back as quickly as she could towards the house. “I ... I need a minute.” She turned back and hurried inside.

“Emma!” Arthur’s voice shouted behind her, but she ignored him. All she could think of was escaping the house as quickly as she could. She ran through the house, grabbing the skirt of her dress and pulling it up around her ankles in her effort to escape.

When she reached the front door, she could hear not only Arthur running after her, but Anne too, each one calling her name, their footsteps loud and fast on the marble floor. She reached for the door handle and flung it open, desperate to be out and away from the building.

She hurried down the porch steps and then picked a direction at random. She didn't really care which way she was going. All she cared about was being away from the house, as if by fleeing it, she could also flee the whirl of thoughts in her mind. Each thought was coming so quickly, one after the next, beginning to blur together until she could no longer make any sense of them at all.

She crossed the road as soon as she could, but in her haste, failed to check the road properly to see if it was clear. Two steps in, she heard the sharp whinny of a horse. She flicked her

head around, watching as a carriage came to a sudden halt, with the horse pulling it rearing back on its hind legs in protest at the sudden order.

“Emma!” Anne’s voice called with panic, but Emma was already moving on, crossing the road and into the clear section, before reaching the other side and onto the safety of the pavement.

As she reached the far end of the street, she turned left, heading towards the Royal Crescent in Bath. At once, the close houses that were compact, closing in around her opened up.

Ahead of her, a lawn stretched out with lush green blades of grass on one side and a perfect crescent of yellow-stone houses on the other. Despite the beauty, she didn’t look at any of it; she just carried on forward, only thinking of her feet pounding against the ground.

“Emma!” Arthur called for her again. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” she called back to him, just as he reached her side. He tried to take her arm and pull her to a stop, but she just shrugged him off and carried on. Behind her, she could see Anne gaining on them too. “I just need some air, that’s all.”

“So badly that you’d risk your life?” Arthur said, his voice irate. “You nearly walked straight into that horse.”

“I ... I was distracted.”

“Too right, that doesn’t mean you have to be so cavalier with your life,” Arthur said, his

voice only growing angrier by the second.

“Your Grace.” Anne’s voice was soft as she reached their sides. She placed a hand on Arthur’s arm, and he seemed to calm at once.

“She could have been hurt,” he pointed out, his tone clear.

“Well, she’s all right. Physically,” Anne said gently, “and I don’t think shouting at her is what she needs right now.”

“Thank you, Anne,” Emma said loudly and walked past the two of them again, heading across the lawn. “All I need right now is to be alone.”

“Alone?” Arthur said, not letting up as he

followed after her, though this time, his tone was at least a little calmer. “Don’t you want to talk about this?”

“What good would talking do right now?” Emma asked, biting her lip as she hung her head and focused on her footsteps through the grass. “My head feels ... oh, Anne, it feels like my ribbon box.”

“All jumbled up?” Anne said and reached for her other side, looping her arm through Emma’s. Emma clung to it instantly.

“Exactly,” she said, striding forward again. “All I need to do right now is to think.”

“Then thinking you shall do,” she said softly. “We will keep you company while you think.”

“Thank you.” Emma offered Anne a brief smile, purposefully looking away from her brother, who she could see was dying to speak.

For a minute, they all walked forward in silence. Emma and Anne peacefully so, but Arthur kept fidgeting constantly. Either he was ruffling his own hair in stress or adjusting his jacket, incapable of staying still.

“This is hardly the peace I wanted,” Emma said pointedly, raising her eyebrows at Arthur.

“It’s hard to say nothing,” he said quickly. “Can I at least say something? That way, I know I’ve done my duty as your elder brother and given some advice.”

“Very well.” She nodded, second guessing her



own thoughts. “Maybe some good advice is all I do need right now.”

“Then I’ll give it, and you can do what you like with it. Whether you ignore it or follow it is up to you, agreed?” Arthur said, turning to her and stopping the three of them from walking.

“Agreed.” She nodded.

“Emma, you may have had two declarations from two different men today,” he breathed deeply, as though gathering the courage to speak, “but you did only receive one proposal.” His words hit home, and Emma hung her head, looking down at the grass between her feet another time.

“Are you speaking against your friend?” Emma whispered.

“Not exactly.” He sighed. “All I’m saying is that as well as I think of John, he hasn’t actually proposed, has he? He sent you a letter. That is all.” Silence followed his statement. For a minute, Emma just rearranged her hand within Anne’s arm, needing the physical support of her friend. “There is not much you can do with a declaration of love. Yet of marriage, now that is something.”

“You’re saying there could be nothing to John’s letter, aren’t you?” Emma asked, her voice quiet indeed as she looked to her brother.

“Sadly, I think it’s something we have to bear in mind.” Arthur paused, clearly waiting for her to say something in return.

“You’re right,” she said after a minute. The more she thought of his words, the more they struck home, how John had always blown hot and cold regardless. What if this was just another one of those moments? The next time she saw him, for all she knew, he could be cold with her again. There wasn’t much to trust in the declaration. She couldn’t give her heart to a man who might not have really meant to give his own at all. “Yes, you’re right,” she nodded and said again, as though trying to convince herself.

“I’m glad you think so,” he said softly. “Now, did you want to go for a longer walk? Or did you want to return to the house?”

“Let’s walk for longer first.” Emma smiled sadly, then looked between her friend and her brother. “Walk ahead, though, if that’s all right. I’d like a minute to myself.”

“Of course.” Arthur offered his arm to Anne.

“Just call if you need me,” Anne said, squeezing Emma’s arm before she released her and moved to take Arthur’s arm instead.

Emma watched as the two of them walked out in front, striding across the grass. At first, she could see them talking together in whispered tones, but then she let the distance between them grow larger and larger. With the need to be alone, she seemed to give them confidence to speak louder together.

Emma was no longer able to think of John or Lord Bolton, she could only look at Arthur and Anne, and the way they were smiling together.

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John pulled the horse to an abrupt halt in front of Arthur's house. It was so sudden that the horse whinnied in objection, but he ignored it and jumped down quickly, passing the reins into the hands of a stable boy that ran forward.

He ran up the porch steps and knocked on the door before stepping back and checking his clothes. In his mad dash, his clothes had become skewed and disarrayed. He hurried to flatten things out, resetting his cravat and straightening his waistcoat. Before he'd had time to flatten his hair, too, the door opened, and the butler appeared.

"Your Grace, how can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Lady Colbourne." John felt his throat constrict at the idea. It would not be easy to confess everything to Emma's face, but he reasoned that now she had read his letter, the hardest part of the confession was done.

He just had to tell her everything now, including what he'd overheard Lord Bolton saying with his hunting party.

"I'm afraid the lady is out, Your Grace," the butler said calmly. John hadn't expected this.

"Ah, I see." He shifted on his feet for a second, struggling to know what else to say. "Is the Duke of Hawksby at home?"

"I'm afraid not," the butler said again. "He and Lady Colbourne went out for a walk, I believe." There was something odd about the way the butler had phrased the words, as though it wasn't quite the truth.

"Will they be gone long?" John asked.

“They left no message, Your Grace.”

In the silence that followed, John looked about the street in the hope that either of them would appear any second, but there wasn't a sign. With desperation, he turned back to the butler.

“I'd like to leave a message for the duke if I may.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The butler nodded, showing he was ready to remember the message.

“Could you tell him please that I'll call on him first thing tomorrow morning?” John said slowly. “I'll be staying at the Golden Lion lodgings up the road if he wishes to speak to me this evening.”

“I’ll tell him, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, goodbye,” John said stiffly and went back down the porch steps, heading for the horse. He gathered the animal quickly, at all times looking up and down the road, but still, there was no appearance of Emma or Arthur.

He mounted the horse and hurried down the road, heading quickly for the Golden Lion lodgings. Once he had arrived and arranged a room, he could not settle. It didn’t matter how many times he paced up and down the room, nor did it matter how exhausted he already was from the long ride, his body would not let him rest. Even when he arranged food for the evening, he couldn’t sit still as he ate it, choosing to walk about the room instead.

If he couldn’t talk to Emma today about what



he'd overheard, then he'd do something useful with his time instead. He haphazardly pulled on his jacket and headed for the door.

The last time he had seen Lord Bolton, he had been heading into that gambling hall. He wanted to know if the man would dare to say anything else about Emma to anyone for fear it might damage her honour.

He rushed out of the door, with his mind made up. If he could not stop Lord Bolton's advances today, then he'd watch over the man instead.

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Emma watched the happy conversation between Anne and her brother, with the smiles and giggles, until their conversation switched to being about Emma's current predicament

and choice of suitors. Then suddenly, something changed.

Anne's smile vanished, replaced by a flattening of her lips as though she held in words. Astonished at the sudden change, Emma walked forward, closing the distance a little to get close enough to hear what was happening.

"Do you really mean that?" Anne asked, stopping walking entirely and turning to face Arthur.

"It's not a nice thought," Arthur said, lifting his chin a little higher, "but I'm beginning to think it's a necessary thought."

"How sad a way to look at the world," Anne said and retracted her arm from his. The atmosphere had shifted completely between

the two of them now. Worried, Emma hurried forward, her feet moving quickly across the grass.

“It may be sad, Miss Braithwaite, but perhaps it’s a sad truth,” he acknowledged again, only making Anne look even sadder than before.

“What’s this all about?” Emma asked, reaching her brother’s side.

“Your brother was just saying that he is beginning to think that maybe love and marriage do not have to go hand in hand, after all,” Anne said tartly, her face suddenly stony.

“You’ve changed your tune,” Emma remarked, raising an eyebrow at her brother.

“All I’m saying is that maybe there’s more to it,” he said, holding his arms out to them both, practically pleading with them to agree. “Alliance. Security. Some kind of certainty in life, perhaps.”

Emma could understand what her brother was trying to say, simply that life was long, and it was important to have such things to guarantee a happy life. Love was not the only thing that meant a happy life.

Anne stepped back as though startled.

“Is something wrong, Miss Braithwaite?” Arthur asked.

“No, it’s just I ...” She looked around herself. “I have a sudden headache. If you would excuse me, I’m going to return to my carriage and head home.”

“Then we’ll escort you back,” Arthur declared.

“No, that is not necessary.” Anne stepped back again.

“I must insist,” Arthur said and took her arm, looping it through his before walking her back across the grass. “Emma?”

“I’m coming,” she assured, walking along Anne’s other side. The more she kept glancing at Anne’s face, the more she was convinced that it was not a headache that was upsetting Anne after all. It was something in Arthur’s words instead.

The walk back to the house took a little longer, as Emma was no longer in such a rush.

She tried to draw Anne into conversation more than once, but it was to no end. She just kept glancing up at Arthur, who now seemed equally uninterested in partaking in conversation.

As they reached the house, the carriage was quickly prepared. As Arthur hurried around, checking the coachman was prepared, Emma took Anne off to the side, whispering to her quietly.

“What is wrong, Anne?”

“Forgive me, Emma,” Anne said softly. “I know you need time to yourself right now, so I will come back tomorrow, and perhaps we can go for a walk? We can talk about Lord Bolton and the Duke of Pembrokeshire then when you have had time to think. What do you say?” She summoned a smile that did not convince Emma at all.

“I’d like that very much,” Emma agreed.

As the carriage was prepared, and the door opened, Arthur offered his hand to help Anne into the carriage. She took it and climbed quickly up, but her behaviour the whole way through the movement made Emma’s eyebrows knit together. Usually, Anne would look at Arthur and thank him for his kindness. Today, she avoided his gaze entirely and seemed as eager as was humanly possible to be in that carriage and away.

“Good day, Your Grace,” she said softly, just as the door closed.

“Good day, Miss Braithwaite,” Arthur’s voice appeared strained to Emma’s ears as he stepped back and joined her side. Together, they waved Anne off, with Emma’s mind solely taken up with thinking of the

conversation Anne and Arthur had been sharing before she had claimed she had a headache.

Was it possible that Anne felt something for Arthur too and was offended by his words that love shouldn't be prevalent in marriage?

As Emma looked at her brother and the way he stared after the carriage, she decided that perhaps it was possible after all. Maybe Anne had just been particularly good at hiding it in the past.

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John had watched from the shadows for most of the evening. He'd even partaken in some of the smaller gambling tables in the effort not to draw attention to himself, though he never bet very much. At all times, his attention wasn't



on the game of cards before him but on the other table where Lord Bolton sat.

As the night went on and darkness crept in through the already heavily draped windows, he watched as Lord Bolton drank more and more. All the glasses of brandy he ordered were knocked back completely, with no dregs at all left in the bottom.

Sometimes he won a hand, sometimes he lost, but he didn't seem to care. He was there to enjoy the thrill of the evening.

When a prostitute came by and sat on his lap for a few rounds of cards, John felt his hands shaking around the cards in his own hand. Lord Bolton was not only dishonourable in his intentions but vulgar in how shameless he was about his actions.

John had nearly had about enough for the night when a familiar face entered the room. It was one of the men from the hunting party John had seen just the night before. He took his place across the table from Lord Bolton and started drinking heavily too. Their conversation was so loud that John didn't even have to strain to hear it, for most of the room could.

"How goes the hunt?" the other man asked.

"So close now." Lord Bolton chuckled. "I'll have her answer by the morrow."

"And you think she'll say yes?"

"I know she will." Lord Bolton gestured at himself as if silently asking, 'how could she refuse?' "This isn't the first time I have done this, you know."

John had had enough. He moved to his feet and left the gambling hall. With no names mentioned, still, he couldn't openly accuse Lord Bolton of dishonouring Emma, but he was getting bolder. Sooner or later, someone else would hear what he was up to.

## Chapter 17

*Emma was no longer in Bath. She was walking around the Hawksby estate and where it bordered Montacule Manor, owned by the Duke of Pembroshire. The last time she had done this walk was before finishing school. She had just been a teenager then, but today, she was an adult.*

*She was walking between the trees; the white birch forest was tall with the trunks of the trees spindly around her, reaching up into the sky like skeletal fingers. Once, the place had looked so ethereal to her, but with the sunlight shining off the trees, making them glow bright white, like bones, she was scared this evening.*

*“Emma?” a voice called behind her.*

*She couldn't see who it was. She whipped her head back and forth, looking between the thin branches. Further along the path, it was still empty.*

*"Emma?" the voice called again.*

*She didn't want to go to it. There was something that unnerved her in that voice, as much as the bone-like trees scared her too.*

*She began to walk the other way through the forest, far away from the voice calling her. When she had done the walk years ago, it had been to head to Montacule Manor, chasing after John and Arthur, who had gone there together.*

*She retraced the path she could remember, just as it turned up a sharp incline. Here the trees became denser, a heavy thicket of forest. Each tree closed in on her, tighter and tighter, as*

*though in the years that she had been gone, the path had become overgrown.*

*“Emma?” the voice called again.*

*She darted her head around; this time, she saw a shadow at the bottom of the path. Someone was following her. She grabbed the skirt of her dress and hitched it up around her knees to run faster. Just a few steps further up the hill, she found the heels of her shoes digging into the ground, making any attempt to sprint impossible. She grabbed the shoes and threw them off, discarding them nearby in the brambles before running again up the hill.*

*Emma pulled at the thin twigs around her that were closing in on her more and more. Soon, she could no longer see the sunshine, and she could barely see the pebble path at all. Her eyes could only make out the white birch twigs drowning her, suffocating her, each one pulling at the tendrils of her hair and her dress, dragging her back.*

*“I’m coming, Emma,” the voice shouted again.*

*Something in her stomach lurched in desperation to be free of it. She could not let them get her. She didn’t want to. She ran on, her legs now stinging at the effort to move so fast.*

*As the hill began to level out, the drowning of the twigs became worse, forcing her to slow. The twigs were scraping her neck, poking at her collarbone, and grazing along her arms.*

*“No ... no ...” she said to the trees, as though she could plead with them to leave her alone. “Let me go!” She was louder this time, demanding too. She lashed out at the twigs up ahead, snapping them.*

*All at once, every twig fell away. The white birch*

*trees that had been bent towards her leaned backwards as if returning to their normal positions, obeying her instruction. The top of the hill opened out and gave her a view of the edge of the Montacule estate.*

*She crept forward, walking in her stocking-clad feet so that each twig broke beneath her soles, causing tiny bruises. She looked to her left, desperate for the view of Montacule Manor she knew could be seen from such a lofted position. Yet there was something in the way of the view. No, someone.*

*From the back, he was just a silhouette. The closer she moved towards him, the more she realized who it was. With his brown hair windswept and still dancing in the breeze, his tall figure was unmistakable.*

*“John?” she said softly, reaching out towards him.*



*At once, he turned his head to her, and his face lit up with a smile.*

*“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said, offering her his hand. She took it quickly, marvelling at the warmth within his palm.*

*“Emma!” The voice behind them in the trees was growing angrier now, calling for her. The fear she had felt before grew to complete terror, and she gripped John’s hand.*

*“Nothing will hurt you here, Emma,” John said to her, whispering to her and drawing her in close. She couldn’t resist; she happily walked towards him, feeling the way his whisper sent a shiver of excitement along her skin and up her spine.*

*“John ...” she murmured, just as he bent his head*

*down towards her. "He's coming for me."*

*"Then he will not get you," he said simply before brushing his lips against hers.*

Emma sat upright in bed. Her pillow was lying across her face, and she threw it off, panting as she looked around the chamber now bathed in sunlight. It took a minute for the dream to leave her.

John's image left her mind, as did the feel of the trees clamouring with their longer finger-like branches, grabbing at her.

She blinked another couple of times before lifting a trembling hand and brushing it across her lips, imagining what it could really feel like if she had kissed John. It was something she may now never know, yet his declaration had made it possible.

She threw off the covers, knowing exactly what the dream was trying to tell her. Denial was futile. Her heart belonged to John. That was no longer the question; the real question was whether John's heart truly belonged to her.

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When Anne arrived that day, Emma spotted the difference instantly. Anne didn't even bother coming into the house. She just waited on the doorstep instead as the butler went to announce her arrival. There was something else, too, for Arthur didn't bother coming to see her.

"You're not going to come and greet her?" Emma asked in amazement, looking at her brother as she stood from her place in the

library, ready to follow the butler back out towards the entrance hall.

“No, not today,” Arthur said, not lifting his eyes from the book he was reading. Something twitched in his jaw, a muscle that suggested he was keeping something hidden.

“Are you all right, Arthur?” she asked softly, walking back to his side to try and speak to him in private.

“Perfectly fine.” He glanced up to her with a fake smile in place. “Enjoy your walk with your friend.” Then he returned his attention to the book. Startled by the change, Emma decided enough was enough. Today, she would find out a little more about what was happening with Anne.

She eagerly followed the butler out to the

entrance hall, where she pulled on her pelisse and bonnet before turning to Anne on the doorstep.

“Are you feeling better today, Anne?” Emma asked, looping their arms together and alluding to the headache she was certain Anne had feigned the day before.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” she said quickly. “Where would you like to go for our walk?”

“Let’s head back to the crescent.” Emma pulled her friend along the road, though today, she was infinitely more careful when she crossed the road. When they reached the arching lawn, she felt Anne patting her hand through the loop of her arm.

“Have you made up your mind then?” she said with a smile. “Two gentlemen to choose from.

I suppose to take a light-hearted view of it all you are a woman spoilt for choice.”

“Oh, Anne, I knew all I needed was your good humour to cheer me up,” Emma said with a chuckle. “I suppose I should be thrilled about the idea.”

“How do you feel?” Anne asked gently as they circled the lawn. Today, the sun was out so brightly that other people from town were taking a walk there too, leaving them far from alone.

“I have a confession to make,” Emma said, looking ahead, almost afraid of looking her friend in the eye. “I had a dream last night that only brought home to me even more everything that I have been trying to repress.”

“Which is?” Anne prompted her on.

“My heart belongs to the Duke of Pembrokeshire.” With these words, she stopped walking, surprised to find Anne smiling at her so. “Why are you smiling?”

“Is this not a good thing?” Anne giggled softly. “You have just agreed that you care for a man who sent a letter declaring his love for you.”

“No, it is not good at all,” Emma complained and pulled her forward again. “Because of so many things!” She threw her other hand up in the air as if pleading with the heavens themselves for an explanation. “Sometimes the duke is so warm, other days so cold. What if this declaration is just another one of those days?”

“Ah, I see,” Anne said sadly with a slow nod. “What else bothers you?”

“What Arthur said,” Emma went on, imbued with vigour now. “He’s right that caring for your partner is not the only thing that construes a happy marriage in life. A comfortable life is important, respect of one another, and let’s face it, *eligibility* as much as I despise the word and how often Arthur bandies the term around at the moment.”

“You have thought extensively of this,” Anne surmised correctly.

“I really have,” Emma agreed. “I guess I don’t know whether to trust John’s declaration or not. Even if I did, that doesn’t mean we could be necessarily happy together. Nor even that he would propose. He hasn’t yet, has he? All he has done is sent a letter. A letter that he could later deny sending at all.”



“That is a rather harsh thought,” Anne said, biting her lip.

“Is it?” Emma wasn’t so sure. “After the way he was so rude at the assembly in refusing to dance with me? I’m not certain what to think anymore. All I know is that though I care for John, I cannot trust the declaration. Arthur was right to caution me.”

Anne said nothing. She just stared forward at the other people walking around the grass.

“You’re thinking something, Anne. Won’t you advise me too? We know what Arthur thinks.”

“I would not dare to advise you on this, Emma.”

“Why not?”

“For the only person who can make this decision and it be the right one is you.” Anne’s words brought Emma up short. She stopped walking and released Anne’s arm just as Anne walked on a couple of steps before turning back to look at her.

Emma thought heavily on these words, how the decision was hers and hers alone. If that were true, then why couldn’t she stop thinking of Arthur’s advice?

“Arthur was saying that Lord Bolton is a secure choice,” Emma said slowly, fiddling with the sleeves of her pelisse. “He is the one who has proposed, after all.”

“Then, you are inclined to follow his advice?” Anne asked, her eyes darting about, clearly

unable to settle.

“I ... am.” Despite the pause in the middle, Emma was growing more confident in the idea. It would certainly be the wise choice, therefore the sensible choice. That could not be escaped. “Arthur is the head of my family as well as my beloved brother. With my father gone, I know he is advising me with my best interest in mind.”

“Then follow his advice if you like,” Anne said softly. “Your brother seems to have very strong opinions on marriage, after all.”

“The conversation you two had yesterday,” Emma followed Anne along the grass as they walked on, “it appeared to upset you.”

“No,” Anne said with a smile. “I was just a little shocked, is all. Everyone is entitled to

their opinion, and I don't doubt your brother is right. He is giving you advice on your situation, and fortunately, you have the luxury of choice between two suitors." As she walked on a little more, Emma hurried to catch up with her, reaching her side quickly.

"Anne, what is wrong?" she asked, watching as Anne looked back to her. "Don't look at me like that. We have known each other for many years, and I can tell as clear as day that there is something on your mind now. Please, confide in me as I have done you." Emma offered Anne her hand, and her friend took it quickly. "If I could be there half as much as you have been here for me recently, I would be glad indeed."

Anne smiled gently, lighting up her pretty features.

"You are too kind to me, Emma." Anne sighed as though gearing up to the next part of their

conversation. “Mr Hamilton is back.”

“Again?” Emma asked, her jaw falling wide at the idea. “I thought you told your mother you wouldn’t entertain another proposal from him.”

“It seems my mother has elected to ignore my opinion.” Anne lowered her head slightly. “Mr Hamilton is calling later today, and as I understand it, my mother has arranged for him to visit us for most of the week, practically every day, he is to come for tea or dinner. It is absurd. I do not really understand why Mr Hamilton is so eager. We do not think alike, we cannot laugh together, and I refused him; you would have thought that would offend any man’s ego enough not to try again.”

“He must be quite besotted, Anne,” Emma said, elbowing her friend with a tease.

“I am not convinced of that, but if he is, that makes it even harder, for I cannot care for him.” Anne stopped walking and turned back to Emma. “You asked me for advice that I refused to give. I’d like to change my answer and give you some advice now.”

“Please, do,” Emma encouraged with a wave of her hand.

“I’m beginning to see how little choice some of us have when it comes to marriage. I might have to accept Mr Hamilton after all. Maybe it’s about doing one’s duty, as your brother said, and maybe it’s not about love at all.” She looked very disappointed at the idea. “All I can say is that as you have a choice, ensure you make a decision that will make you happy. Even if it is out of duty as well.”

“You have never sounded so wise.” Emma

smiled and led them further down the lawn in their walk.

There was something in Anne's words that had really affected Emma. She was right that not everyone had the luxury of making a choice, and Emma had that blessing.

She had very nearly made up her mind on whether to accept Lord Bolton's proposal. All she needed to know now was whether she could really care for Lord Bolton, given a little time, then she could be happily married to him.

## Chapter 18

“Are there any messages?” John asked the lodging house owner as he reached the bottom of the steps. He’d barely slept all night in expectation of at least one note from Arthur, yet nothing passed under his door.

“Just one, Your Grace.” The elderly lady who had leased him a room passed him a folded piece of parchment. He took it quickly and crossed the room to read it in private, but to his disappointment, it wasn’t from Arthur or Emma.

*Your Grace,*

*As requested, I have watched Lord Bolton’s house and can confirm he did not come back from the*



*gambling hall until the early hours of the morning. This morning he has left the house and has gone into a building on Cheap Street in the centre of town.*

*I'll update accordingly.*

*Thomas.*

John folded the note again in frustration. He'd asked his footman to watch Lord Bolton and where he went after the gambling hall after he had come home the night before. This news dismayed him. While Cheap Street did have a few reputable houses on one end, the other end was known to house a brothel.

The mere idea made John scrunch up the parchment and shove it heavily into his pocket. He had to pray with all his might that Lord Bolton would not do something so

disgraceful as to visit a brothel and in broad daylight too. The man's confidence that he could get away with such deception was beyond belief.

John had to find out, one way or another.

He said goodbye to the lodging house owner and made his way to Cheap Street by foot. Each turn in the road, the town seemed to be growing busier and busier with people. The heat of the day was clamouring, and each time John had to slip between groups of people, he adjusted his cravat and waistcoat in the effort to cool down.

By the time he reached Cheap Street, he was ridiculously hot, pulling at the jacket in frustration and having to remove his hat to fan his face with it. Around him, lots of other people were doing the same thing, finding the heat of the day insufferable.

His footman was one of them. He'd removed his jacket and was sitting on a low-lying wall at the end of Cheap Street, fanning himself with his flat cap.

"Thomas?" John called his name as he reached his side.

"Your Grace." Thomas bowed quickly to him as he reached for his sleeves and rolled them up. "Warm day, isn't it?"

"Just a little," John said, certain that if he stayed out in the sunshine wearing so many clothes for too long, he could faint out of the heat. He had to distract himself. "Which house did Lord Bolton go into?"

"That one." Thomas pointed to a narrow

building squashed between two others. Tall, consisting of four floors with windows that had been darkened or covered, its frontage announcing its business. Even in the doorway now, a young lady stood there. The thin pelisse she was wearing over her dress was a clear attempt at modesty in broad daylight, but John didn't doubt that if a man approached her, she'd open the pelisse.

John grimaced as he laid eyes on the building and each of the covered windows, some draped with dark red curtains, others with purple velour, for it was the one building he hadn't wanted Lord Bolton to go into. The brothel.

"How long has he been in there?" he asked Thomas.

"An hour at least," the footman explained. John cursed under his breath, irate that Lord Bolton would be so disgraceful to Emma's

honour. If there was an understanding between the two of them by now, then this was beyond the pale and unforgivable.

He had to warn her. Now.

“Keep watching, Thomas,” John pleaded and patted his shoulder. “Send messages to the lodgings when he makes a move.”

“No problem, Your Grace.” Thomas nodded and pulled out his handkerchief, patting the sweat dry on his forehead.

John left quickly, rushing across town in his effort to reach Emma’s door as quickly as possible. At least while Lord Bolton was in the brothel, he knew he could reach Emma’s house first.

In his harried walk, the heat grew even worse for John. The jacket and shirt were clinging to his body, making his nerves at seeing Emma grow greater. But there was little he could do about it now. He had to see her today, despite the heat and the sweat.

When he reached her road, he bounded up the porch steps taking two at a time before knocking loudly on the door. In his impatience, he knocked a second time before the butler appeared and opened the door.

“Your Grace, are you well?” The butler’s eyebrows shot up as they took in John’s state.

“Perfectly,” John lied, taking out his handkerchief to mop his brow. “Is Lady Colbourne in?”

“I’m afraid not, Your Grace,” the butler said stiffly. John had to stop himself from cursing, in disbelief of his bad luck to have missed her twice in two days.

“How about the duke?” he asked, unable to keep the sound of hope out of his voice.

“He’s in, Your Grace; follow me.” The butler beckoned him inside.

John found the heat inside the house wasn’t much cooler, but at least he was out of the strong sunshine as he walked through the corridors. He was shown into the library, but just before the butler opened the door, John paced out a small circle in the corridor. He had wanted to talk to Emma first about what he felt for her, yet Arthur was her brother. It was a strange feeling now to tell the friend he considered his own brother that he was in love with his sister. It was all too close for comfort and an intimate conversation he hadn’t

properly rehearsed.

“The Duke of Pembrokeshire, Your Grace,” the butler announced him and gestured for him to go in.

“John?” Arthur’s voice called him from inside the library. John walked in, swallowing his nerves, to find Arthur in as much a heated state as he was. He’d thrown off his jacket and had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The windows around the library were all open too, to let in some breeze to help cool them.

“Arthur.” John crossed the room and offered out his hand as Arthur jumped to his feet.

“Well, you look in as great a mess as I feel.” Arthur laughed, shaking his hand. “Have you ever known this heat?”



“Not that I can recall,” John agreed and threw off his jacket.

“And you look more nervous than I have ever seen you.”

“I presume you know why,” John said slowly as he took his sleeves and began to roll them up.

“That I do.” Arthur nodded before looking back to the butler. “Lemonade, please, something to help us with this heat.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The butler bowed, leaving the two of them in privacy. John couldn’t sit; he just paced up and down the room as Arthur perched on the edge of a desk table nearby.

“Your sister received my letter then?” John asked, pausing in his pacing.

“She did,” Arthur said slowly. “It caused quite a stir.” John stayed silent for a minute, unsure how to approach the subject further. “She revealed the full contents to me and even asked me to read it.”

John covered his face in embarrassment. He hadn’t even considered Emma doing such a thing, yet now he heard it, it made sense. She would naturally go to Arthur for advice.

“Arthur, I’m sorry.” John lowered his hand again to find Arthur watching him closely.

“What for?”

“You’re her brother and her guardian. I should have spoken to you first about what I felt. That would have been the proper thing to do,” he admitted, just as the door opened behind them and the butler reappeared, carrying a tray with a jug of lemonade and two glasses.

“I am hardly concerned about that, John,” Arthur said quietly, standing from his chair and collecting the jug from the butler’s tray. “Thank you.” As Arthur poured out the glasses of lemonade, the butler left again. “John, you and I have known each other all our lives, not to mention you have known Emma for that long too. Quite frankly, if you wish to speak to Emma in private, there is nothing improper about it in my mind.”

John sighed from relief, only just realizing how terrified he had been of Arthur’s opinion on the matter.

“Then ... you are not mad at me?” he asked, just as Arthur passed the glass into his hand.

“I am ... something,” Arthur acknowledged, his face much graver than normal. “I have no objection to how you declared your affection for my sister, though needless to say, I’m astonished that this is the first time you would say anything of it.”

“I know.” John winced, setting his eyes on the lemonade.

“I’m certainly angry at that,” Arthur said, moving away and looking out of the window to drink his lemonade. “You’ve known Emma for years, and the very moment you decide to say something is when another gentleman approaches her.” He turned back round, fixing John with a firm glare. “You have no idea how confused you have left her. You have messed

with her life, John.”

“It was not my intention to mess with her life,” John said strongly, stepping towards Arthur and pleading with him to understand. “What choice did I have? Lord Bolton’s advances made it imperative.”

“All the more reason you should have said something sooner before the occasion arose.”

“Do they have an understanding then?” John asked, fearful of the answer while at the same time needing to hear it. “Are they betrothed?”

“He has asked the question, though she has not yet answered it.”

John couldn’t feel relieved. It was as he had

suspected, Lord Bolton was going ahead with his plan.

“Lord Bolton’s proposal is by the by. You still should have said something before,” Arthur said, gesturing towards him with his glass.

“I know; I know.” John held up a hand in surrender. “I’m sorry. I know it’s wrong. I know the timing is awful, but I was backed into a corner.”

“Care to tell me just how long you have felt this way about my sister?” Arthur said, bearing a small smile.

“In truth,” John shifted his weight uncomfortably between his feet, “since we were teenagers.”

“Wow,” Arthur let out a chuckle. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you’re excellent at keeping a secret.”

“Thanks,” John said sarcastically, sipping his lemonade.

“It wasn’t until recently when Lord Bolton appeared at all that I began to suspect how you felt.”

“You knew?” John nearly choked on his lemonade. He coughed harshly and had to thump his chest a few times to clear his airways.

“Well, that took you by surprise.” Arthur chuckled again and walked past him, clapping him on the back to help with the choking. “That better?”

“Thanks,” John said, breathing deeply. “You knew?”

“Knew is a relative term.” Arthur smiled, reminding John of his friend’s jests on the day they went to Glastonbury Abbey. The comments on that occasion had suggested he knew something. “I suspected. Let’s say that. I didn’t expect you to declare your devotion that strongly. Something which I must admit, both Emma and I are suspicious of.”

“What do you mean?” John asked, setting down his glass to concentrate on their conversation.

“To use her words, you are hot and cold with her,” Arthur said with full seriousness. “Some days kind, other days aloof and quite frankly, hurtful.”



“Hurtful?” John winced at the idea.

“Don’t you remember the way you refused to dance with her?”

“Yes.” John sighed and sat down nearby. He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and steeping his fingers against his forehead.

“Can you blame us for suspecting whether your declaration is going to be permanent or if it’s going to disappear in the next moment?” Arthur’s words were harsh, making John uncomfortable in his chair.

“You’re my friend, Arthur,” John said carefully. “I’m startled to see you think so ill

of me.”

“I don’t think ill of you.” Arthur’s harsh tone abated a little as he took the chair opposite him. “I’m just ...” He shook his head as though feeling lost.

“What?” John prompted him on.

“I’m confused and worried for my sister,” Arthur said, his tone grave and quiet. “As worried as I am for you too, you know as well as I that I have to put her first.”

“I know.” John nodded. The tone of the conversation was not as expected, but now he was feeling even more worried than before. “Am I to take it then that she did not receive the letter well?” he asked nervously, lowering his hands and fidgeting.

“You want to know what she thought?” Arthur said, lifting his eyebrows. “Oh no.” He sat back in his chair. “You want to know what Emma thinks? Then you have to talk to her yourself. I’m not getting involved.”

“Where is she?” John asked, sitting straight. He had already faced his fears in having this conversation at all, speaking to Emma about it did not seem so scary anymore.

“Out with Miss Braithwaite,” Arthur said, shifting in his seat. “Do you remember her from the assembly?”

“Yes,” John said, recalling the pretty face of Emma’s friend. “She was with Emma at the assembly.”

“She was.” Arthur nodded; his manner was hard to define as he knocked back what was left of the lemonade in his glass.

“Are you all right, Arthur?” John asked, trying to understand his friend’s sudden manner.

“I’m fine,” Arthur said, hurrying to pour himself a second glass. “Let’s return to the matter at hand. When Emma’s here, I’ll leave you two a minute alone to speak in private.”

“Thank you,” John said, fiddling with the glass in his hands. He was restless now, certain he would never be calm again until he had spoken to Emma.

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Emma waved Anne off in the carriage just as the heat of the day became cloying. She took her pelisse off and threw it over her arm, desperate to be free of its warmth. The day's sunlight was so strong that she felt a little lightheaded.

As she turned towards the porch steps, she caught sight of the open window at the front of the house through which voices could be heard. She stepped towards it, keeping her back against the wall in her effort to hear who was speaking.

"Something's wrong with you, Arthur. Won't you tell me what's wrong?" It was John's voice. The sound of it made Emma's back stiffen.

"We're dealing with your problem today. We'll deal with mine another day," Arthur said, dismissing the conversation entirely.

Emma couldn't go back into the house. She couldn't face John; she was not ready to meet him yet. Her walk had helped to clear her head, as had Anne's words, and she had almost resolved herself on accepting Lord Bolton's proposal, but she wanted to be absolutely certain of her decision before she spoke with John.

Fanning her hand against her face in the effort to cool her skin, she hurried back down the porch steps and walked quickly along the road in the other direction towards the town centre. She figured if she didn't go far, everything would be fine, and Arthur need never find out she was out of the house without company or an escort. She needed this peace for a minute longer.

The more she walked, the hotter it seemed to get. Whereas with Anne, they had hidden under cover of the trees in the nearby park and rested in the shade under the leaves, in

the centre of the street, she did not have that luxury. As she walked between the houses, the heat grew worse, to the point that she struggled to stand straight at all.

She had been determined to think of Lord Bolton and John, yet now her thoughts were errant. She found herself concentrating on just putting one foot in front of another instead, determined to keep walking forward.

When her vision of her feet became hazy, she stopped walking entirely and reached out for the yellow-stone wall of the building beside her. Her hand collided against it, just as she became even dizzier.

She was aware of those around calling to her, strangers in the street worried about her. She couldn't answer them, feeling far too light-headed now.

Behind the people that gathered near to her, a carriage pulled up, and the door opened. The face that stepped out she knew well. His expression altered as he found her leaning against the wall.

“Emma?” His voice rang out above the others, just as dots appeared in front of her vision.

She reached out to the wall with both hands, anxious to keep herself standing, but the darkness swept in completely. As all turned black, she felt herself falling. Only she never hit the ground. There was an arm around her waist just as she lost consciousness.



## Chapter 19

“Emma?” the voice stirred her.

She had passed out for just a moment as the blood returned to her head and her eyes flickered open. She was indeed resting in someone’s arm. She looked up to see Lord Bolton above her. He was the face that had hurried out of the carriage, coming to her aid.

“Emma? Can you hear me?” he was asking, his voice full of concern.

“Yes,” she said, just as he reset her on her feet, though he didn’t release his grasp on her. It was intimate though necessary to stop her from falling.

“All right, the lady is fine,” Lord Bolton called to the people around them that had stopped to watch. “Give the lady some room, please.” As the people began to disperse, Emma looked up to Lord Bolton, both startled and incredibly thankful for his arrival. “It is the heat, isn’t it?” he said with a smile. “Unbearable today! I myself thought I might pass out at any moment.”

“I’m eternally grateful to you, My Lord,” she said softly, not knowing quite how to express what she felt. “Had you not been here, I would have fallen to the floor and might have done myself an injury.”

“It was fortunate I was on my way to see you then,” he said smiling. “I thought we’d discussed this ‘my lord’ business,” he said softly. “Please, call me Anthony.”

“Very well, Anthony.” This time, as she said his name, she felt a small thrill. Maybe this was right after all.

“How are you feeling now?” he asked gently.

“A little better,” she answered, though still the heat was so intense that she could feel the sweat pooling between her shoulder blades. “I am in need of a drink, though.”

“Then please, come.” Anthony steered her towards his carriage, his hold on her waist still strong. “There is a teashop nearby where we can take a drink.”

“But...” Emma paused before entering the carriage, looking around. “My brother does not know where I am, and we have no chaperone.”

“Then let us rectify that.” He smiled and clicked his fingers, beckoning two footmen attending his carriage. “Harry, you shall be our chaperone for the morning. Lewis, I need you to deliver a message to the Duke of Hawksby’s house. Please inform him that his sister and I are to take tea around the corner from here. Please tell him as well of her illness due to the heat and that we thought it necessary for her health.”

“Of course, My Lord.” Lewis bowed and hurried off down the road at once.

“There, that better?” He turned back to her. The effort he had gone to in order to be the perfect gentleman and keep her happy brought a new smile to her face.

“Thank you, Anthony,” she said, suddenly feeling more comfortable at saying his name.

This time when he offered her his hand to help her into the carriage, she took it gladly, pleased both for the coolness inside the coach and the safety he was offering her.

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“What is the message?” Arthur asked just as the butler arrived.

John had felt thoroughly interrogated by Arthur’s questions now. He was so harried and his manner so ill at ease that his clothes were skewwhiff from the number of times he had fidgeted. He was drinking another glass of lemonade, trying to quench his dry mouth, when the butler appeared, saying there was a message.

“It is from Lord Bolton, Your Grace.”

John coughed and dropped the glass, nearly choking for a second time that day.

“John, you really are in a mess,” Arthur said good-naturedly and clapped him on the back again. “You’ve lost the ability to drink at all.”

“I just thought ...” he was struggling to explain himself. “I thought Lord Bolton was busy this morning.” He couldn’t tell Arthur he knew the man was at a brothel. For one thing, he hadn’t yet broached the subject of what Lord Bolton had said to the hunting party, for he felt it right to tell Emma this news before Arthur. Without this piece of information, he knew he couldn’t tell Arthur he’d been following Lord Bolton. That would be a surefire way to sound like a man driven mad with jealousy. Maybe he even was.

“What did the lord have to say?” Arthur

addressed the butler.

“It seems as Lady Colbourne was returning to the house, she grew faint in the heat. Lord Bolton happened to be passing and saw her state. He has taken her to the teashop in Queen Square for some refreshment and will escort her home soon.”

“Thank you.” Arthur nodded to the butler. As he bowed and left the room, silence descended between the two men. One that was eventually broken by Arthur. “Lord Bolton is a good man, John.”

“I have reason to think otherwise,” John said darkly.

“That is just your jealousy talking. What evidence do you have to suggest otherwise?”

John looked at his friend, the words on the tip of his tongue ready to be said, but he closed his mouth again. It was Emma's reputation that would be tarnished if she continued with Lord Bolton, not to mention her heart possibly broken. She had to know first.

"What I know I should say to Emma," he concluded.

"Very well." Arthur nodded. "That I do not think I can argue with, but surely even you have to admit that such a message as the one we've just heard shows Lord Bolton not only cares about my sister but intends to protect her too?"

"Protect her?" John practically scoffed at these words.



“John, your derision makes no sense.”

“As I said, my reasoning must be told to Emma first.”

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Emma was only too grateful for the cup of tea as she and Anthony sat down in the busy teashop. The building itself was set into the corner of Queen Square, meaning it was mostly covered in shade and was a good chance to escape the heat too. With so many people in the shop taking a similar opportunity to hide from the sun, they were well chaperoned, and for the first time, Emma felt truly comfortable in Anthony's company.

“How are you feeling now, Emma?” he asked gently, moving his chair to come up beside

her. He placed a soft hand over her wrist as she held onto her teacup.

“Much better, thank you,” she said, smiling back at him.

“I must say, this has all rather taken me by surprise.”

“What has?” she asked.

“This ... feeling,” he gestured to himself. “I cannot describe to you the panic that consumed me when I saw you turning faint in the street. Neither do I think I have ever run so fast as I hurried through the crowd to stop you from falling.”

“I was lucky you were there,” she said.

He smiled and then took hold of her wrist a little more, slowly pulling her hand away from the teacup to press their palms together. This was new ground, but not unwelcome. On the contrary, Emma could see now that this was just what she needed. New excitement, someone new to care for her to stop her thinking of John for good.

“I know I have promised you time to think about your answer, which is why I will not press you for an answer now,” he whispered, leaning a little towards her. In the hubbub of the teashop, Emma looked around, wary of anyone watching them too closely, but nobody looked their way. “But if you will permit me, there is something else I’d like to say on the matter.”

“Of course,” she encouraged him, turning her body a little more towards him in her chair.

“I want you to know, Emma, how devoted to you I already am,” he said softly. “I know that sometimes I reach for charming lines in the effort to make you smile and that sometimes they hit the mark and other times they miss.”

“You certainly are fond of such lines.” She giggled as he chuckled too.

“That I am, but it is just my desperation to see you smile.” As he spoke, he moved his hand and began to dance his fingers across her wrist. The effect was instant, making a tingle travel up her arm. “I need you to know that I am devoted to you, that I admire you greatly, that this affection I feel inside has grown within such a short space of time that it has left me in no doubt of what I hope for in my future. I do not mind waiting for you if time is what you need to be confident you are making the right choice. I’m more than content to wait. I just want you to be happy, Emma.”

His words filled her with a kind of hope. Her mind flashed with a possible future at the side of Anthony, one where she was married to him. She thought of their wedding, walking down the aisle escorted by Arthur towards Anthony, who would wait for her by the altar. She pictured her dress, the flowers in her hand, and even the way Anthony would smile, waiting for her.

As she reached the altar, Arthur would happily pass her over, and she would take Anthony's arm as he whispered something loving in her ear. Just before they would turn to face the vicar, she would catch a glimpse of where Arthur took a seat in the pews of the church. Beside John.

Her mind was brought sharply out of the imagining. It hurt. She felt practically wrenched from it, all because she had imagined seeing John's face. She had gone from contentment to disappointment within

seconds.

John couldn't give her what Anthony was offering her.

"I've never known a man with your kindness," she said sweetly to Anthony.

"Now I think you are being too kind to me," he admitted, sitting back in his chair. "Come on, I best escort you back home before your brother suspects we have run off to Gretna Green together." At his jest, she laughed heartily.

The two of them stood, and as he offered his arm, she took it only too gladly. They walked out to the carriage waiting for them in the road and stepped inside. It was only when the carriage set off that Emma realized what was wrong with the scene before her. She and

Anthony were alone in the carriage. The footman that had been chaperoning them before was not in the carriage with them but sat up with the driver out the front.

“Anthony,” she said, startled as she turned to him sat opposite her. “We have no chaperone.”

“It is but a short journey,” he said good-naturedly. “I vow you are safe with me.” She nodded, trying to find comfort in it.

For a few minutes, they made the journey in comfortable silence. As Emma began a conversation about the heat of the day and how she couldn’t remember another summer like it, Anthony began to move.

“Anthony!” she said in surprise as he crossed the carriage and came to sit beside her on the

bench. "What was that about being proper?"

"Forgive me," he said with a smirk. "I find it difficult to resist you."

"You are fond of such lines," she said pointedly, gesturing between him and the other side of the carriage. "Now, go back. What if someone were to see us like this with you sitting so close to me?"

"No one can," he assured, shaking his head. "We are safe here, and I hope you do not dislike being so close to me?"

On the contrary, she didn't mind at all. As he waited for her answer, she could not give it, showing what she truly felt.



“Thank goodness for that.” He smiled, inching even closer to her on the bench. “Well, I’m going to take a brief advantage of our time alone together,” Anthony whispered to her, his smile lighting up his features.

“You know that is improper.” She giggled, despite herself. She couldn’t help being intrigued by his words and wanting to know a little more. Was that so wrong?

“I would never behave truly improperly towards you,” he said with sincerity, “it’s just I get carried away with my affection for you.”

“That could be the same thing.”

“How could something that feels this good be wrong?” he asked as he picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. Emma sucked in a sharp breath in surprise. He’d kissed her hand

before, but this time it was different. He turned her palm and kissed the centre before dropping another kiss to the inside of her wrist. His lips were like a tease, tantalizing of what else could come, before sneaking another kiss a little further up her arm. “Does this feel wrong to you, Emma?”

“I ...” She was struggling to find her voice. She couldn’t say anything at all as he slid towards her on the bench seat. All she could think of was the heat, and it wasn’t any longer just caused by the strong sunlight of the day. She felt heated as Anthony slid towards her.

“It all feels so perfect to me,” he said softly as his face neared hers. He stopped with his lips close to hers, hovering above her with temptation. “Does anything about this feel improper to you, Emma?”

She was tempted, severely so. She could even feel herself reaching up towards him, and then

the carriage came to a stop. The sound of the horses whinnying and the wheels skidding across the cobbles brought some sense to her, and she pulled back, increasing the distance between them.

“Nothing felt wrong about that,” she admitted, watching as Anthony’s face spread into a wide smile.

“It seems our stolen moment together has come to an end,” he said with a chuckle. “Allow me to help you down.” He reached past her, going for the door of the carriage and stepping out first.

For a second, Emma stayed perfectly still and collected herself, hoping she could calm the mad blush that had overtaken her face and settle her heartbeat that was now so frantic she could feel it pumping in her chest. Once a little more settled, she turned to take Anthony’s hand and let him help her down

from the carriage.

As he smiled at her and lifted her hand one more time to kiss the back, now in front of other people wandering the street, he was the perfect picture of propriety again. Emma felt a certainty bloom in her chest.

She was confident now how right both Arthur and Anne had been. Arthur in his advice about choosing a suitor who was eligible and well-matched to her, but Anne was right too in making sure her choice would bring her happiness. To Emma's mind, Anthony was that choice.

He would never be cold to her or aloof the way John was. She was also confident he'd never refuse to dance with her or say cruel things. He had protected her that morning and given her a brief taste of excitement.

Anthony could make her happy.

She had made up her mind. The next time she saw Anthony, she would accept his proposal. First of all, she had to tell Arthur of her intention and one other. She had to tell John that his advances were unwelcome, no matter how much the idea of doing so pained her.

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John stood from his seat and walked to the window at the sound of the carriage. Arthur remained sitting in his chair far behind him.

“Is it them?” Arthur asked.

As the carriage door opened, John felt his

heart sink within his chest.

“It is,” he said, not bothering to conceal the sadness from his voice. As Lord Bolton helped Emma out of the carriage, it was plain to see the closeness between them. They stood close together, and Lord Bolton raised Emma’s hand to kiss the back too. The entire time, Emma had this full smile on her face as though giddy with excitement. The blush across her cheeks, too, looked to be caused by more than just the heat of the day. That’s when John realized that no one followed them out of the carriage. “They didn’t have a chaperone with them in the carriage,” he said sharply, turning back to look at Arthur.

“He has proposed to her, John,” Arthur said plainly, as though it explained everything. “I’m about to let you be alone with my sister too, so you shouldn’t complain about such a thing.”

“You will?” John asked, still nervous about the idea.

“Yes, I trust you,” Arthur said, standing to his feet. “Despite the oddness of your declaration of love for my sister.”

“Thanks,” John said with narrowed eyes. “You give little allowance for fear of rejection, do you?”

“I’m sorry, John,” Arthur said, his voice softening as he walked to his side. “I truly am sorry for you, I am.” He clapped his shoulder as the two of them turned to face out the window.

Lord Bolton and Emma had clearly said goodbye to one another, and Emma was walking up the front porch steps as Lord Bolton returned to his carriage.

“She looks so happy,” John said, feeling the tightening sensation in his chest growing worse.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Arthur asked.

John clamped his lips shut, certain Emma would not think so when he told her exactly what Lord Bolton had said about her. “I’ll go and bring her to you now.” Arthur turned and left the room, leaving John alone to practice for a few minutes exactly what he would say to Emma.



## Chapter 20

“Emma, Lord Bolton’s message said you were unwell?” Arthur met her in the hallway.

“Yes, I felt faint,” she hurried to explain. “I was fortunate he was there when he was.”

“Very fortunate indeed,” he said with warmth and took her arm. Together, they walked across the hall, heading towards the library.

“Arthur, I’ve made up my mind,” she said quickly, knowing she needed to say it now. “About Lord Bolton.”

“I see, and?” he encouraged her.

“I have decided to accept Lord Bolton’s proposal.” Her words brought them to a stop in the centre of the entrance hall.

“You have?” he asked, clearly unable to hide his smile and happiness at this idea. “What made up your mind?”

“It was both your advice and Anne’s thoughts,” she said quietly as she glanced towards the library door, knowing exactly who was beyond it. “This morning, Anne and I were talking about what it means to be married happily and that maybe you were right. Marriage is about more than just affection for one another.”

“Miss Braithwaite agreed with me?” Arthur said, frowning.

“You do not look pleased by the idea,” Emma said, mimicking his expression.

“I am, of course, I am, it’s just ...” He paused and then shrugged off the words. “It doesn’t matter. You were talking about your decision over Lord Bolton.”

“Anne said bearing in mind a choice of a husband, that I should make a choice that will make me happy. Where I’m certain the man I marry will go to the effort to make me smile and give me a happy life.” Emma glanced back to the doorway, thinking of the man who had just left her. “Lord Bolton goes out of his way to make me happy, and look what happened this morning. He was dead set on ensuring I was well before making me travel anywhere. Is that not a good man to choose?”

“He certainly sounds it,” Arthur agreed with a

deep nod and a smile. "I think you could be happy with him."

"I'm relieved to see my decision pleases you," she accepted, feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders. What Arthur thought mattered to her very greatly.

"I just want you to be safe and happy, Emma," he said softly and patted her hand on his arm.

"I know." She returned his smile. "It was a particularly interesting talk I had with Anne just before we parted ways. It seems she has decided on her own matter of marriage."

"I beg your pardon?" Arthur looked startled by this news. "Miss Braithwaite isn't getting married."

“Arthur, have you not been paying attention?” Emma practically laughed at her brother. “Mr Hamilton.”

“But ...” Arthur paused and then cleared his throat, “as I said before, the two of them are so ill-suited. I’ve even heard your friend talk of what an ill fit the two of them would make. Surely you are not trying to tell me that she has changed her mind?”

“Well, it seems no matter what Anne thinks of Mr Hamilton, her mother thinks something else,” Emma explained, watching as her brother’s expression altered yet again. “He has been invited to her house every day this week. Actually, Anne sounded this morning almost resigned to the connection. She talked about choices and even said it was rare for a lady to have the choice I do. I think it was her way of alluding to the fact that she felt she had no choice.”

Arthur said nothing at all, but he stood very still indeed, his body practically unmoving apart from breathing.

“I have startled you,” Emma said softly. With sudden realization, she thought how to the point and careless her words may have been. She had just spoken about her friend’s situation while not thinking much about how this could affect Arthur. If she was right before in that Arthur did feel something for her friend, then this news had to be shocking. “Arthur? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said, though he was no longer looking at her but somewhere in the distance. “You are confident she intends to accept Mr Hamilton if he proposes again?”

“No,” Emma said gently, “but Anne is clearly debating her answer.”

There was a sound nearby, coming from the library, as though John was moving about in the room.

“He’s waiting to speak to you,” Arthur said quietly.

“How long has he been here?” Emma whispered as the two of them crossed to the door.

“All morning,” Arthur acknowledged. “I have never seen him in such a state. Do me a favour, Emma. I know you now intend to refuse my friend, but please,” he paused, breathing deeply, “be as gentle as you can. He’s hurting enough as it is. I shudder to think what he’ll be like after your rejection.”

The idea of seeing John so hurt almost made Emma waver in her decision. Almost. Then her mind flashed with Anthony's kindness from that morning, and her mind was made up again.

"I promise," she said sweetly to her brother before reaching for the door. To her surprise, Arthur hung back and released her arm. "Aren't you coming?" she asked.

"No," he said, taking another step back. "I think it's best you two talk alone. You should be able to speak freely with one another without fear of someone like me or any other chaperone listening in. I trust him, Emma."

"I know you do." She offered him a small smile before turning to the door. With her hand on the doorknob, she took a minute to build up the courage to walk in.



She was about to come face to face with a man she had borne feelings for these last few years. Now, she was going to reject him. It all felt so wrong somehow. She lifted her chin, reaching for her determination, and opened the door.

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John looked up as he heard the door open. He had found the book he had sent to Emma as a present and was flicking through the pages in an attempt to distract himself, but it was no good. He'd found the bookmark she had left between the pages, showing that for just a few days, she had already made good progress with his gift. He was thrilled she had liked it so much.

He placed the book down and turned to the door, feeling his breath hitch as he saw Emma standing there. Today, her auburn hair was piled high on her head, with just a few

wayward curls hanging down to frame her face beautifully.

She didn't smile, but she closed the door softly behind her, breaking their eye contact for a second before turning back and lifting her eyes back to his again.

"Your Grace," she said and bobbed a curtsy.

"Emma," he said her first name, unable to bear using her title at all. He could see the surprise in her features, her eyes widening. "Arthur said you received my letter?" He began delicately, feeling his nerves had grown so much that he was unable to stand still, constantly shifting his weight between his feet.

"I did," she said softly and took another step into the room. That movement made him find his own energy. He strode forward towards

her, but as he closed the distance, she stepped back again, clearly startled by it. “Your Grace, I must speak –”

“Please, let me speak first,” he begged of her, watching as her eyes darted about his figure, apparently unable to settle on his face. “I know this is all coming very late in the day. I know you are now being pursued by another and that this is all too much. Arthur has impressed upon me again and again this morning what confusion I have caused.”

“Confusion indeed,” she acknowledged, walking around him. She hurried towards an armchair and took a seat, perching on the end. She looked reserved, as though she was trying to distance herself from him.

John felt the pain of it, but he had to push on regardless. He grabbed a nearby footstool and brought it to sit down in front of her. She leaned back in clear surprise at the sudden

close distance.

“Your Grace!”

“Emma, please, just give me a few minutes to explain, I beg of you.”

“To explain what?” she asked, her eyes wide. “You sent me a letter declaring that you love me after years of treating me with what can only be described as aloofness and practical disinterest.”

“It’s never the way it was meant to come across,” he pleaded with her.

“Yet that was the way it did come across,” she said quickly, leaning forward towards him too. He tried not to be thrilled at the close

position, but he was, despite the anger in her quiet seething tone. “You make little sense to me now. The man I thought I knew is clearly not who you are at all. And I find I cannot trust the man who wrote that letter.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, feeling the pain in his chest grow even tighter. “Emma, we’ve known each other since we came into this world. You know me. You know who I am. You know you can trust me.”

“No, I don’t,” she said firmly. “For the man who wrote that letter is different to the man I know.”

“Then allow me to put that right.” He reached for her hand, unable to stay away. She looked even more shocked than before, leaning back from him though she didn’t retract her hand. “I have been in love with you for years. Do you remember the day you fell into the river, and I pulled you out?” he asked, waiting and

watching for the small nod she gave. “That was the day when I first began to realize it. That no matter where I went and who I met, no one would compare to you. I know this is all coming too late.”

“It is very late,” she said vehemently again. Her hand was warm within his. “Your Grace, you cannot declare this to me now. What do you even want from me in return? What are you hoping for?”

“A chance to know that I have a chance,” he begged of her, taking her hand in both of his and clasping tightly to it. “A chance that maybe I could still win your heart, despite everything that has passed.”

She said nothing for a minute. Silence descended between them as she looked down at the hold he had on her hand.

“I just ...” She shook her head after a second before closing her eyes. “I struggle to understand you at all. How can you care for me?” She opened her eyes another time and looked back up at him. “How is that possible?”

“Emma, have you never noticed how well we get along together?” he asked, watching as she blushed. “We have the same sense of humor, even the same interests. The other week, you and I talked at length into the night about our interest in the past. Did you not enjoy that evening?”

“Of course, I did,” Emma acknowledged. “It’s not easy to find someone who is as interested in the past as I am.”

“Then you see it too,” he pleaded. “We not only get along and enjoy each other’s company, but there’s something else here. To my mind, at least.” He looked down at her

hand again, realizing just how much she was not saying on the matter of whether she had any affection for him. “I’ve never known that way I feel when I’m around you with anyone else. That is the simple truth. You’re beautiful, both in heart and soul.”

“John, please,” she begged, using his first name as though trying to stop him. Now he was in the flow of his outpouring, he couldn’t stop.

“I have loved you for years, Emma,” he said softly, looking up to her again. He could have sworn there were tears in her eyes, but she kept blinking, apparently trying to stop them from falling.

“Then why did you never say anything?” she whispered back to him. He hung his head, mostly from the shame of answering her honestly.



“Because I was terrified of what could happen if I did,” he acknowledged openly, thinking on Peter’s words back at the house. His quietness had always been from fear. “Your brother is my best friend. We’ve grown up together. For one thing, if I declared anything when we were younger, then I’m sure I would have been dismissed as a child with a foolish fancy that would pass.”

“I never would have said such a thing.”

“But it is what would have happened,” he said, for he knew it to be the truth. He looked up at her. “Once I started keeping the secret, it became only too natural to do so. Whenever I was cold to you or aloof, it was only my attempt to distance myself from you, in the hope that if I hid myself away from you, I could somehow protect myself from a broken heart.” He now realized what little good such an endeavour had done for him. Here he was, already feeling that his heart was on the brink

of being crushed.

“Please, Emma,” he asked of her, “tell me I am not too late.”

He was desperate to hear her answer. To his horror, she looked away from him. It prepared him for her next words.

“It is too late,” she said, her voice cracking slightly as a tear escaped down her cheek.

He hung his head, feeling that broken heart he had feared for so long finally happening. It was as though something was being crushed in his chest to smithereens, the hope being smashed along with it.

“Lord Bolton has proposed to me,” she

explained and began to retract her hand. He let her go, missing the warmth of her touch the moment it was gone. “And I intend to accept.”

The horror washed over him even more. He knew Lord Bolton would never go through with the engagement. He’d take what he wanted, draw her to his bed just as he said he would do, and then he would leave her, both breaking her heart and reputation.

“You can’t accept Lord Bolton, Emma,” he said strongly.

“Why not?” she asked, trying to dry the tear from her cheek. “Just because you’re here now declaring you love me?”

“I –”

“Lord Bolton has shown again and again recently how much he cares for me. This very morning, he made his devotion plain to see.”

“You cannot trust him,” he said softly, preparing to tell her just what he had overheard, but Emma seemed uninterested in hearing him out as she just kept speaking.

“A friend of mine recently gave me some advice. That when choosing a suitor, I should pick the man that makes me happy.” Her words made him sit back on the stool, fearful for what she would say next. “You, John, have only brought pain and confusion. Anthony goes out of his way to try and make me smile.”

“Anthony?” he scoffed, hearing her say his name. “You call him Anthony now?”

“I do,” she said quickly, “and I intend to continue to do so. If I marry him, he could make me happy.”

“But, Emma, please, listen to me,” he begged, leaning forward another time. “Before you give Lord Bolton your answer, just let me tell you what I overheard from Lord Bolton this week.”

“No, John,” she said implacably and made a move to stand. “Move away, let me up.” He did at once, leaning back in the stool to give her the freedom to move to her feet. She walked a little distance across the room and looked back at him. “You are a man whose jealousy is all-consuming at this moment. I cannot trust anything you have to say about Lord Bolton. No more than I can trust your own declaration of love.”

“You doubt it?” He was amazed and jumped to his feet, following her across the room. “I’ve just put my heart on the line, done what I always feared to do, and still, you doubt that I’m telling you the truth.”

“Some days you’re kind, and some days you’re cold. Tomorrow you could be aloof again,” she pointed out strongly, stopping her tears entirely. “I cannot trust your affection would be constant.”

“It is not my constancy you should be doubting but Lord Bolton’s,” he said, his words full of vigour. “Please, Emma, just let me tell you what I heard this week. When I was coming back to Bath, I stopped at some lodgings for the night. There, I saw Lord –”

“I don’t want to hear it,” she said again, louder than him. “Anything I have yet to learn about Lord Bolton, I will learn on my own, and not from the words of a man who is

merely jealous of him.”

John was stunned she would not even hear him out. He stood back, staring at her, watching as she took control of her tears. Even now, he admired her. Both her strength of conviction and her good heart, but it was misplaced. She was trusting a man who could not be trusted.

“Nothing I can say will persuade you to think again of Lord Bolton?” he whispered into the air between them.

“Nothing,” she said plainly, breathing quickly. “I am sorry, John.” She took a single step towards him. “I am sorry to cause pain anywhere, but I cannot understand you, and neither can I return your affection. No matter what I feel.”

“Wait ... what?” he asked, hearing these words as she looked away from him. There was something there, a hint that maybe she did feel something for him after all. “Emma, did you just say you are not indifferent to me?”

“That does not matter,” she said boldly, returning his gaze again. “I am sorry, but I cannot return what you feel. I will be marrying Lord Bolton.”

Her words put a clear end to the discussion. Where John had felt nerves and fear before, it was now all replaced with sadness and a gut-wrenching feeling.

“Nothing I can say will ever change your mind, will it?” he asked softly, without hope.

“No,” she said again.



“Then I will take my leave of you,” he said quietly and reached for the jacket he had discarded over a chair nearby. He hurried to pull it on before turning back to her. She looked almost as upset as he felt. He walked towards her, closing the distance a little.

He needed to say goodbye to her, even if this was not how he had dreamt this moment would go. “Emma, I want you to know, I wish you all the best for the future. I hope Lord Bolton can make you happy. If you ever ...” He paused, knowing she wouldn’t let him speak ill of Lord Bolton, yet he had to say something of support. “If he ever hurts you, and if you ever need help, you know where to find me.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely audible at all.

He bowed to her then, returning to formality. He heard her breath hitch as though she were about to cry again. He couldn't bear the sight of it.

He left the room quickly and then the house, not even hesitating to see Arthur, who had been waiting for him, sitting on the staircase in the entrance hall. He couldn't speak to anyone right now. Not while he could feel his heart breaking, just as he had always feared it would.

## Chapter 21

“He’s here, Emma,” Arthur said, peering his head out of the door and into the garden. She nodded and took her place again at the table where tea had been set up. Arthur retreated inside, leaving her alone and waiting for Lord Bolton’s arrival.

It had been just a day since her conversation with John. Though she had spent most of the day and the night after crying, just remembering the pain in John’s face and the sinking feeling within her own chest, she was still confident in her decision.

Despite the spark and the enamour she felt for John, it would pass in time. That spark could not be relied upon for a happy life, and Anthony’s proposal could.

In answer to her thoughts, the door opened again, and Anthony appeared.

“Well, this is a fine spot.” He came bounding out to her quickly. As she stood, he took her hands, kissing the back of each one in turn. “I was delighted to receive your note.”

“I’m glad; there is something I wished to speak to you about,” she said, watching as he looked around the garden space. Surrounding the small patio they were sat upon were great trellises of roses, encasing them and giving them a very private feel.

“I am noticing we have no chaperone again today?” he asked, clearly unable to keep in his smile as he looked back to her. “Should I take hope from this observation?” She nearly laughed at his childlike excitement.

“Come, sit,” she pleaded, urging him to take a seat at the table beside her where she had set up tea and cake for them. “I have an answer to your proposal.”

He reached for her hand again, even before she had said anything. Her fingers were within his grasp, and that same excitement she had felt the day before in his carriage was back.

“Which is?” he encouraged, prompting her on as she fell quiet.

With his hand on hers, she was momentarily distracted. She looked down at the grasp, and in her mind’s eye, she pictured that it was no longer him holding her hand but John. She was back in the library with him as he sat before her, holding onto her, the pain and love evident in his facial expression. The mere memory of it washed over her with sadness.

“Emma?” Anthony’s words brought her back to the moment at hand. She focused on Anthony and breathed deeply, trying to clear the tightness from her chest.

“I ...” she paused, building up the courage to say the words. “I would like to accept your proposal. If the offer still stands, I would be delighted to marry you, Anthony.”

“Oh Emma.” He pulled his chair towards her. “I cannot describe how happy you have made me at this moment.” He leaned toward her as though about to kiss her. She leaned in, desperate to know what it was like when another face flashed before her. John was in her mind again. Instead, he was the one leaning towards her, just like in her dream.

“Ah-em.”

At the sound of someone clearing her throat, Emma leaned back, away from Anthony. She turned to see Arthur had made an appearance at the back of the house.

“Is it time to come and wish the happy couple congratulations?” he asked, his smile great indeed. As Anthony jumped up to shake Arthur’s hand, Emma tried to find solace in the moment and ignore how wild her imagination was becoming. She had made the right decision; yes, she was confident in that.

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“There are quite a few letters this morning,” Arthur said as he proffered a bunch to Emma. She sat at her end of the table, hurrying to open the letters as the staff served up their breakfast. “They must be replies to our dinner

celebration this weekend.”

“They are,” Emma concurred as her brother took his seat at the other end of the table. Between bits of food, she kept opening more letters, reeling off a list of people that could come. Since she had agreed to Lord Bolton’s proposal, the arrangements for a celebration had been put together quickly by Arthur. To Emma’s surprise, Anthony hadn’t been able to persuade his parents to come down from London, but he said they would go and celebrate there together later in the summer.

“It seems I’ve received some of the letters too,” Arthur said as he opened a couple more letters. “One is from our mother.”

“How goes her trip?” Emma asked, knowing just how delighted their mother would have been when she heard the news.



“Oh, she adores it, clearly,” Arthur said, waving the letter in the air. “I do not think I’ve ever seen her gush so. She’s thrilled at the news and is already making arrangements to return to celebrate with us, but unfortunately, she can’t make it back for this weekend as she has prior engagements. She hopes to be here in three weeks,” he explained. “We’ll have to have a dinner with just our mother and Lord Bolton then.”

“That seems a good plan.” Emma nodded and picked up another letter from the table. The handwriting of this letter was one she knew well, and she hurried to open it, knowing it belonged to Anne.

*Dear Emma,*

*It is with regret that I am afraid I cannot attend your celebration this weekend. I wish you all the congratulations I can give you and hope we can*

*see each other soon.*

*With all my love,*

*Anne.*

Emma put down the letter, startled by its brevity and lack of explanation. She had not only been confident that Anne would be at the evening come what may, but she had been looking forward to her friend being there with her as support at this tumultuous time. It seemed something was amiss, and Anne's lack of explanation seemed all the more suspicious.

"How strange," she muttered aloud.

"What is?" Arthur asked as he tucked into the sausages on his plate.

“Anne cannot come,” she said rather miserably. To her surprise, Arthur’s cutlery clattered on his plate. “Arthur, is all well?” she asked, looking up at him again.

“Perfectly,” he said quickly, picking up his cutlery another time. “It is a shame she cannot come. Is she seeing Mr Hamilton?” He looked very intrigued about the answer.

“Arthur ...” Emma sat forward, leaning across the table to get a little closer to her brother. “I know I have teased you in the past about this, but I am going to genuinely ask you the question now. If Anne were to marry Mr Hamilton, would it upset you?”

Arthur seemed distracted as he picked up his coffee with one hand to drink and fumbled, trying to open another letter with his other

hand.

“No,” he said as he placed the coffee down again, his voice so high-pitched it suggested a lie. “I would be happy for Miss Braithwaite, of course, I would be. The match would be very ...” he trailed off.

“Eligible?” Emma proffered, smirking at her own use of the word, just as Arthur cringed.

“I’m beginning to see why you detest the word so much,” he acknowledged as he turned his attention to his letter. “Ah, there is another who cannot make the evening, though this is hardly a surprise.”

“Who?” Emma asked.

“John.” Her brother’s answer made Emma fall still. He was right in that it was far from being a surprise. They had all doubted he would come, yet the truth that John was now avoiding Arthur in the effort just to avoid her was also hurtful.

She never wanted to cause John pain, even though she knew that was exactly what she had done. She supposed in time, things would become a little more normal again, just as soon as John had got through the worst of the pain.

“Have you seen him recently?” Emma asked, thinking through the days that had passed. It had been a week since she had accepted Lord Bolton’s proposal, and she was certain John had not been to the house since.

“Not at all,” Arthur said sadly. “I tried once. He was out.”

Emma felt her sadness grow stronger. In her effort to distract herself, she picked up another letter. To her surprise, this one also bore Anne's handwriting, though it was a little scruffy as though written in a hurry. She opened it quickly.

*Dear Emma,*

*I apologize for the brevity of my last letter. I have sent this one out to you this morning as an urgent delivery because my mind is in turmoil. I beg of you to meet me if you can tomorrow.*

*Four o'clock tomorrow, I'll wait for you on the lawn of the Royal Crescent. If you can escape your house for a few minutes, I'd be ever so grateful. There is something I must speak to you about, or I fear I will lose all sense of reality completely.*

*Yours*

*Anne.*

Emma closed the letter again, feeling her curiosity peak. As she turned her eyes up to Arthur, despite her suspicions of his affection, she thought it right not to share the contents of this letter with him.

Anne clearly intended this matter to remain private.

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John looked around the more permanent lodgings he had requested while staying in

Bath. After Emma's staunch rejection the week before, he'd returned to his estate the same day, determined to put as much distance between them as possible. Yet his days at Montacule Manor showed that it would be impossible to forget Emma there.

So, he had returned to Bath, hoping that the events of the Season would do well to distract him from Emma. He also continued his preparations for turning the mill on his estate into a school and putting together arrangements to interview possible teachers for the role.

Now, as the sun was going down, he pushed the applicants' papers away from him across the desk and reached for the carafe of brandy he'd placed there. He poured a large brandy, one so large it nearly reached the rim of the glass. At least this was one way to dull the pain he felt for a little while, to drown it in brandy.



He was halfway down the first glass, with his cravat removed and the top button of his waistcoat undone, when he heard the knock on the door.

“Enter,” he called. The door opened instantly, but no immediate sound followed. John was far too busy staring at the brandy in his glass even to bother turning round.

“Well, this is what you have been doing with your time, is it?” Arthur’s voice spurred him into action. John shot to the edge of his chair and whipped his head around, nearly sloshing the brandy over the rim of his glass. “Careful, you’ll waste a good drink.” Arthur smirked and pointed at the glass as he crossed the room.

“How did you get in?” John asked.

“The owner of the lodging house was only too pleased to let me in when I explained I was a good friend, though she did look perturbed at the lateness of the hour that I called,” he said and took a chair from nearby, sitting down with a hefty slump. “If you’re going to drink yourself into a stupor, at least allow me to join you.”

John felt the momentary relief of a smile and reached for a second glass that he happily topped up with brandy before pushing it into Arthur’s hand.

“How much of this have you been drinking this last week?” Arthur asked as he gulped from the glass.

“The truth?” John said as he sat back in his chair again. “Far too much and more than I have even bothered keeping track of.”

“It’s no way to live your life.”

“I know that, but it will do for now,” he answered honestly as he sipped from his own glass, basking in the burn at the back of his throat. “Why are you here, Arthur?”

“It’s a good question,” Arthur rested his head back on the chair. “I’ve been wondering where my friend has disappeared to this last week.”

“I have to stay away from her, Arthur,” John said plainly. “It’s too painful.”

“I know.” He nodded. “But you don’t need to stay away from me, my friend.” He leaned forward again and offered his glass towards him in a kind of toast. “I’m here to help you. So, if you intend to drown your sorrows in

alcohol for the time being, then I'll keep you company while doing it."

"I'll drink to that," John said with humour, causing Arthur to chuckle as the two of them chinked glasses.

They both lapsed into silence for a few moments as they drank their brandies. Arthur eventually broke the silence, though the topic of his conversation did not bring John any ease.

"I've never seen you this way," he remarked. "You look in physical pain."

"That's because it's how it feels," John said quietly as he went to top up his glass. He offered to do the same for Arthur, who leaned forward gladly. "I can't describe it, really. I struggle to put it into words at all."

“I know,” Arthur said and sat back again. There was something in these simple words that caught John’s attention.

“When you say you know...” John gestured to him, “what do you mean, exactly?”

“Let’s just say that I’m no stranger to heartache myself.” Arthur smiled as though it were no big deal.

“You have kept that quiet,” John complained.

“Are you actually accusing me of keeping a secret from you?” Arthur pointed out with a smirk.

“Fair accusation,” John nodded. “I kept a secret from you for years. Now you know my secret, can I ask you yours?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Arthur sat back and stared into the bottom of his glass. “I find myself not knowing how to put any of it into words at all really. A bit like you.”

“Then, there is a woman who has caused this heartache?” John asked, worried for his friend.

“There is a woman,” he said slowly, “but she is not so much the cause of the pain as is my own doing. At least, I think.”

“You’re not making much sense.”

“I know.” Arthur sighed and turned his eyes to the ceiling.

“Could you give me any more clues?” John asked. “I don’t like seeing you in pain.”

“Then you know how I feel when I look at you,” Arthur said and pointed at him with the brandy glass. “Look, all I’m willing to say at this time is that my situation was unclear. All I know is that what I wanted could never be. Now, it definitely could never be.”

“You’re separated from each other,” John concluded, receiving a nod of confirmation from Arthur.

“There is one way in which my pain is different to yours, though,” Arthur said.

“What’s that?”

“I never had the courage to tell her what I felt,” he said quietly. John was so surprised, he sat straight in his chair, his spine going rigid. “In many ways, I admire you, John, for having the courage to tell Emma.”

John laughed, the drink now taking over his mind and addling it slightly.

“Some good that courage did me.” He continued to laugh for a minute. “I think I’d call it foolishness.”

“Maybe they’re the same thing?” Arthur offered.



“Perhaps so,” John agreed, looking to his friend and realizing what a state they were both in. Here they were, both lovelorn, hurting, and trapped, unable to do anything about their pain except wait for the sting to pass. There was only one way to make themselves feel better, for now. “To drowning sorrows then,” he said and picked up the carafe again.

“Quite so. Top her up.”

## Chapter 22

When Emma saw Anne across the lawn of the Royal Crescent, she hurried to meet her friend. Even at some distance, despite the strong sunlight of the day, she could see her friend looked almost ill. She was much paler than normal, and where there was usually always a smile pinned to her features, today, there was only sadness.

“Anne, how are you?” Emma asked with full feeling as she reached for her friend’s hands.

“I’m fine,” Anne said quickly back.

“That is a fib. I know it. Your letter has had me worrying all night and day. You must tell me what is wrong,” Emma pleaded.

“First, let’s speak of you for a while,” Anne said, linking their arms together and directing their walk towards the park opposite the crescent. “Though I cannot come this weekend to your betrothal celebrations, I want to hear all about everything. How goes it with Lord Bolton?”

“Well ...” Emma smiled. “I find the more we speak, the more we have in common, and the more I like him.” It had been quite a revelation to her over the past week. When they had attended the concert together, she was delighted to find Anthony agreed with her on almost everything she felt about the music. He also went to great lengths to care for her, bringing her drinks at all possibilities and even offering to escort her home when Arthur didn’t want to leave so soon. “He is so caring,” Emma explained, “constantly there for me. I now know how right you were in the advice you gave to me.”

“Was I?” Anne asked, her face looking a little surprised.

“Yes, in that you said I should pick the gentleman that makes me happy. Lord Bolton makes me happy, and he goes out of his way to make me smile,” she said gesturing to the smile on her face. “What better man could there be?” she asked this question rhetorically, despite the fact inside she felt a rebellion against it. As though her whole body did not agree with her. But she chose to ignore it. She knew if she didn’t ignore it, then it would only be a matter of time before she started thinking of John again.

“I am so happy for you,” Anne said, squeezing her arm. “It’s so exciting to watch you start this new life and to marry a man so kind, well, what a relief that is.”

“At the end of next week, Lord Bolton is going

to escort me to the ball at Countess Rushford's. It will be quite a formal affair where we will be announced as a betrothed couple," Emma rushed to explain. "Say you'll be there, Anne, please. I know you cannot make it this weekend, but I would dearly like your support at the ball."

"Then you will have it." Anne smiled. "My mother has already confirmed we are to go to the ball. On that note, there is something I must tell you."

"Go on," Emma encouraged, noticing how the smile on her friend's face wavered slightly.

"The ball is likely to be my last event of the Season, and this may well be my last Season altogether." Anne's words stunned Emma so much that she stopped walking straight away, bringing her friend to a halt.

“What do you mean, Anne?” she asked, her words coming stuttered with the surprise. “Why would this be your last Season?”

“Because of what has happened this week,” Anne said, her manner altogether nervous. “My mother has quite lost her patience, it seems.”

“I do not understand.” Emma changed their connection, pulling on her friend’s hand in a pleading action.

“It seems my mother thinks this is the last Season I can attend before I am labelled a spinster,” she said quietly, looking around others circling the park, clearly in the hope that no one would overhear them talking. “Our family’s money is running low, and she has no intention of paying for me to attend another Season. All the dresses, all the events, and more. It’s just too much.”

“But ... I thought ...” Emma bit her lip, nervous of bringing up the subject of Mr Hamilton again.

“I know what you thought,” Anne said with a small smile. “When we last spoke, I thought the same. The conversation your brother and I had and then the one I had with you convinced me that I had very little choice in the matter. That if I wished to be married, then this was my only choice.” She shrugged, seeming helpless. “I had to accept Mr Hamilton.”

“Then, what went wrong?” Emma asked. As others gathered in the park, the two of them walked forward again, ambling between a row of birch trees, away from the hustle and bustle.

“Two days ago, Mr Hamilton asked for a private audience,” Anne explained quietly. “As expected, he proposed.” She broke off for a minute before looking back to Emma, her features fallen in sadness. “I couldn’t say yes.”

“Why not?” Emma asked.

“Because I could never be happy with him.” Hearing Anne’s words made Emma cling much tighter to her friend’s hand. “I just couldn’t be. I’d forever be disappointed that I couldn’t be myself around him, that I’d have to be prim and demure and rarely make jests at all. My goodness, it did sound like a dull life indeed.”

“You can’t live a dull life, Anne,” Emma said firmly, knowing it would make her friend miserable.

“It all came into focus as he asked the



question,” Anne continued. “Without hesitation, I refused him. I was polite. I thanked him and hoped that I didn’t cause pain, but I knew in my heart the truth. That I could never marry a man I didn’t care for. Least of all, a man who I was so ill-suited to.”

“Oh, Anne,” Emma said smiling. “Why can’t I help feeling you have made the right decision?”

“Because now it seems my mother has given up hope on me entirely. No more Seasons, and I truly will be the definition of a spinster.” Anne looked down at herself, gesturing at her own body, apparently horrified.

“Stop talking of yourself so,” Emma pleaded. “You are too young to be called so much.”

“Am I?” Anne almost laughed. “My mother

doesn't seem to think so. She has condemned me with the title already. Her mind is clearly made up. This is the last Season for me." When a tear appeared in her eyes and her breath hitched, Emma couldn't control her sadness for her friend. She wrapped her arms around Anne and pulled her into an embrace.

The two of them were hidden by the thicket of trees from other passersby, allowing Anne to snuffle and cease her tears on Emma's shoulder before she pulled away again.

"I know it's right," Anne said. "I would rather be alone all my life than marry Mr Hamilton, but I wasn't expecting this."

"Anne ..." Emma felt bold as she clutched her friend's hands in her own. She had been suspicious long enough of the supposed interest between her brother and Anne. It was time to find out properly now that all secrets were coming out, what was truly happening.

“Am I right in thinking that your pain is partly because of another gentleman as well?”

Anne walked on, though she still held Emma’s hand in hers. Emma hurried to keep pace with her friend.

“Are you running away from me at the mention of him?” Emma asked.

“The mention of him,” she acknowledged quickly. “I haven’t spoken of it out loud. Not at all.”

“Then I am right?” Emma asked. She cut in front of her friend and stopped her from escaping completely, bringing their harried pace to a halt. “Am I permitted to guess the name of the gentleman that has turned your head?”

“What good would it do?” Anne asked boldly. “You and I both know it could never happen. Allowing myself to ever develop affection for him was foolish. I should never have allowed it to happen.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple to control who you care for,” Emma said kindly, trying to hold onto Anne’s gaze. “It’s my brother, isn’t it? It’s Arthur.”

Anne said nothing for a minute. She just breathed heavily, returning the strong gaze. Then, she nodded, and Emma felt awash with relief. Suddenly, every suspicion she’d had slotted into place, and it all made sense.

“How long?” Emma asked.

“I don’t know.” Anne shook her head. “I always liked your brother, but it wasn’t until this Season that I realized who he really was. What kind of man he was, I mean,” she hurried to explain. “The more we talked, the more ... enthralling he seemed to me. He never seems ashamed when I’m not as proper as other ladies, and he’s not afraid to practically guffaw at laughter with my jests.”

“I’ve seen that myself,” Emma said with a small smile. “So, you are well suited.”

“In manner, perhaps,” Anne acknowledged, “but in position, you know we are not.” The honesty struck Emma hard. She knew very well what Anne meant. Arthur was a duke and expected to make a good connection with his marriage. He was supposed to find an heiress to marry, with some healthy dowry or a grand position with the ton in London. Anne was not those things. Though her family was respected, they had no titles and no fortune. What was more, their money was dwindling rapidly these days. “It can never be,” Anne

said quickly. "And my foolish heart has only betrayed me by ever permitting me to hope for such a thing."

"But Anne, you must know something of what Arthur thinks of you too," Emma said with hope. "He has always gone out of his way to see you this Season."

"I thought so too, but I was wrong," Anne continued. "I'm quite certain now he was just being polite."

"No." Emma shook her head, not wanting to believe it.

"I think he was," Anne said again. "Nothing has ever been explicitly said between the two of us. The realization of how great a fool I had been came when we followed you out here to the Crescent."

“You seemed upset by what he said,” Emma said, remembering the day clearly.

“The duke made it perfectly plain to me what his thoughts were on marriage,” Anne said cautiously. “I think perhaps he suspected my affection, and it worked well to warn me off. It certainly worked. He said again and again how marriage was a duty for someone in a position like yours and his.

He was using your betrothal to almost talk about himself, only indirectly. He said that marriage could never be about just caring for one another. There were other hurdles that couldn’t be crossed. I think title and wealth were the key ones.” She added the last part miserably before taking Emma’s arm and drawing her further down the walk.

“Anne, I don’t know what to say.” Emma felt tongue-tied.

“You know the truth though, Emma,” Anne said kindly, bearing a sad sort of smile. “Your brother and I are worlds apart. Even if such a miracle were to occur that he returned what I felt, there are too many hurdles, just as he said. It can never be. And now, I’m going to grow an old spinster.”

She chuckled at the last part, surprising Emma by finding humour in the situation. “I suppose I’ll have to find something to get me through the pain. I remember an elderly woman who lived alone on the street where I grew up. She was mad for birds, and the whole house was full of them in their little cages. Perhaps I’ll become as mad as her someday.”

“Oh, Anne.” Emma laughed with her just as she fought off tears. She admired Anne greatly for trying to stay upbeat despite the pain of



the moment.

There was something in the words that stayed with Emma, though as they continued their walk. The idea that Anne and Arthur were worlds apart. The more Emma thought about it, the more convinced she was that that was how she looked at her and John. Not that they were worlds apart in situation, but so far apart because of the timing of everything.

She had a feeling she knew exactly how Anne felt.

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“If you’re in there drinking yourself into a stupor again, then this has to stop.” Arthur’s words through the closed door were coupled with three sharp knocks on the wood.

“I haven’t touched a drop today,” John answered honestly before lowering his voice. “Yet.” He looked through the applicants’ paperwork again for the school. He was going to start interviewing the teachers the next day, and he’d already received word that morning from home that the architect had begun work on the mill with the carpenters. Within a few weeks, the place would be transformed.

“Thank goodness for that,” Arthur said, opening the door and striding into the room. “As good as that night of drinking was, we can’t do that all the time.”

“Sadly, I agree with you,” John said as he selected another letter with an applicant’s details. “That is why I’m concentrating on the preparations for the school instead.”

“Well, I’m here to distract you for a moment.”

Arthur elbowed him, earning his gaze.

“What with?” John asked.

“An invitation.” Arthur sat on the table beside him. “Countess Rutherford’s ball is next week. You may not be coming to Emma’s celebration this weekend, but I must insist you come to the ball. Without you, I’m sure I’ll find the whole event dull.”

“Very well,” John said, without much hesitation. He had decided it was imperative to start attending some of the events that Emma and Lord Bolton would attend. Clearly, he could not stop Emma from walking into Lord Bolton’s trap by warning her, so he would just have to keep a close eye on Lord Bolton instead and stop him before anything happened.

“You’ll come, then?” Arthur asked, with clear hope in his voice.

“I will,” John nodded in agreement.

“This is on one condition, though,” Arthur said, holding up a hand. “You can’t spend the evening trying to warn me about Lord Bolton again.”

“Last night didn’t do much good, did it?” John pointed out with a sombre tone. A few glasses in, his addled mind had once more tried to warn Arthur about Lord Bolton. He hadn’t even mentioned the hunting party when Arthur shut down the conversation.

It was clear neither Arthur nor Emma was going to hear a word said against Lord Bolton. John knew now even if he did manage to get the words out, they were unlikely to be

believed.

“No. So you won’t talk of it anymore.”

“Fine,” John acknowledged, his mind made up. He may not be able to say anything on the matter, but he hadn’t given up yet on trying to protect Emma from the lust of Lord Bolton.

## Chapter 23

“Hide me from my mother, I beg you!” Anne appeared at Emma’s side. Emma had barely taken three steps into the ballroom when Anne appeared at her side. Arthur had already escaped, crossing the room quickly in search of John, leaving Emma alone.

“Anne, let me breathe. I have barely arrived.” Emma laughed as a servant helped to take off her pelisse. “What is happening?”

“You look beautiful, Emma.” Anne was distracted, looking down at Emma’s dress.

“Thank you, Anne, that’s very sweet.” Emma took her friend’s hand as they walked across the ballroom together. She had taken special

care when she dressed for the evening. Lord Bolton had inferred that this would be the evening where they made their engagement formal with an announcement at the ball, so she was keen to dress well for the occasion. She was wearing an ivory gown with an empire line and short sleeves that puffed around her shoulders. The silk of the dress was embroidered around the bust with golden swirls and tiny yellow beads. It was one of her favourite dresses.

Emma flattened out the skirt, keen for no creases to have remained from the carriage ride. As they crossed the room, she looked around the other guests, marvelling at the splendour on show. Countess Rutherford's ball was ostentatious to the extreme, with not only grand ladies wearing feathers in their hair but the candelabras around them too.

Even the tables lined with punch bowls and wine glasses had delicate decorations weaved between them, with tree stems painted gold and white rose petals strewn across the

surface.

“This is quite a sight to behold,” Emma said as Anne led her towards the tables.

“I fear I cannot take it in,” Anne said softly, “all I can think of is my mother.”

“What is happening?” Emma asked, turning to her friend and giving her full attention to the matter at hand.

“As this is to be my final event, my mother is doing everything she can to throw me into the arms of a gentleman here,” Anne said, blushing as she hung her head down. “I feel excessively sorry for the poor men. They’re here to enjoy themselves, and my mother keeps barrelling into conversations and insisting they dance with me. It is so improper! She rather reminds me of a peacock



this evening, cawing loudly in people's faces and flashing her fan like it's the bird's feathers."

Emma smiled at her friend's detailed image.

"Can you say no?" Emma asked. "When she pressures you to dance?"

"You have met my mother, right?" Anne laughed. "You remember how difficult she is to say no to."

Emma cleared her throat and pointed behind Anne wordlessly. She could see the very problem they were discussing was now walking towards them, fluttering her fan so near to her face, it was a wonder she wasn't hitting her cheeks with it.

“Anne, there you are, you escaped me,” Mrs Braithwaite said, taking Anne’s arm and trying to disentangle her from Emma.

“Yes, sadly, my attempt to hide from you was not successful at all,” Anne said boldly.

“Anne!” Mrs Braithwaite exclaimed. “Lower your voice. My apologies, Lady Colbourne, what must you think of my daughter.”

“I think the world of your daughter, Mrs Braithwaite,” Emma said, still holding onto her friend’s arm keenly. “I would like her to stay and talk with me a while if you can spare her.”

“I’m afraid that must wait for later,” Mrs Braithwaite said and managed to disentangle their arms at last by tapping Anne’s shoulder

with the closed fan in her hand. “Anne, I have persuaded Lord Ellsworth to dance the next set with you.”

“The poor man.” Anne sighed as she was steered away. “Emma,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. “Help me hide better next time.”

“I promise,” Emma said to her, just before she stepped out of earshot.

Once alone, Emma drifted over to the punch table, pouring herself a small glass of white wine as she surveyed the scene around her. It was extremely busy tonight, with the vaulted ceiling and painted walls full of the guests’ shadows. The room was bathed in amber candlelight that glistened off people’s alabaster faces and glinting jewellery. As Emma glanced between the faces, she couldn’t see who she was looking for: Lord Bolton.

He had promised to arrive early tonight, ready for her arrival, yet he was nowhere to be seen. She kept looking around, desperate to catch sight of him, but the only face she could find in the crowd was Arthur, who waved and began walking towards her.

“I thought you were looking for the Duke of Pembrokeshire?” Emma asked as he arrived back at her side.

“I was, but I cannot find him,” he said as he poured himself a glass of wine. “He promised he would come, so I hope he will stand by his word. He cannot avoid the sight of you and Lord Bolton together forever.”

The words made Emma freeze, with her white-gloved fingers tightening around the spindle of the glass.

“He didn’t want to come for that reason?” she asked, her mind casting back to the look of pain on John’s face when she had rejected him. Every night when she went to sleep, she saw that expression again. She couldn’t bear the sight of his pain.

“Naturally,” Arthur said as he took a sip from his glass. “He’s lovesick for you, Emma. I fear it will take John a while to get over you.”

Emma looked away, aghast to be hearing the words.

“I thought you had been keeping him company for the last few days to cheer him up,” she said as she struggled to find words. She’d rather hoped with Arthur spending so much time with John recently, it would have helped to move past the pain.

“I have kept him company in his sadness. We do well to look after each other in such states.”

“Sadness?” Emma snapped her head to her brother, watching his face carefully. “What grief are you suffering, Arthur?”

“No grief at all,” he said defensively, suddenly much more interested in the wine in his glass.

She could very well guess at the source of his sadness, even if he refused to speak of it. She watched him closely, ready for when he glanced up from his glass. His eyes crossed the room quickly, finding someone on the other side of the ballroom. Emma could see just who his gaze was following; he had found Anne dancing with Lord Ellsworth.

Emma moved closer to her brother's side, bumping her arm with his.

"You don't need to hide things from me, Arthur," she said softly.

"Leave me to my thoughts, Emma," he said, snapping his head away from Anne to look back to her. "You are lucky to be betrothed to someone you care for. Enjoy this time. Do not concern yourself with me."

"You are my brother," she said with feeling, bumping his elbow again. "I cannot ignore your pain so easily."

"Let us talk of something else," Arthur said, clearing his throat and turning to face her fully. "Where is Lord Bolton this evening? I thought he was supposed to be here."

“As did I,” she said, glancing at the doorway. “He must be running late. I am sure that is all.” She had been greatly enamoured by Lord Bolton’s attention the last few days. He visited her often, and there were stolen moments of touches between them, but they hadn’t yet had another one of those near kisses like they had experienced in his carriage. The memory of it tingled now as she looked away from the door again. She tried to distract herself from thoughts of Lord Bolton, looking past Arthur’s shoulder to where Anne was dancing as an idea occurred to her. “I understand Anne has left Mr Hamilton rather upset after she last saw him.”

“How can she?” Arthur said, turning to the table to refill his glass. “I thought you said she intended to accept his proposal.”

“She changed her mind,” Emma said clearly. A loud chink followed these words, and she



turned her gaze towards her brother to see him dropping his glass on the table. "Are you all right, brother?"

"Of course," he said quickly, picking up the glass again and hurrying to mop up the spillage of wine with some napkins laid on the side of the table. "Why did your friend refuse Mr Hamilton?" he asked, with his gaze firmly down on his glass as he topped it up.

"I think you should ask her that yourself," Emma said, feeling mischievous.

"I could never ask her such a thing; she is your friend," he said, lifting the full glass to his lips again.

"And you think she isn't yours?" she asked, watching as her brother's eyes flitted her way over the rim of the glass. "Arthur, you may not

have confided in me, but I am not blind,” she whispered and moved towards him again. “You have an intimacy with my friend. If you wish to know why she rejected Mr Hamilton, ask her yourself. You may be remarkably interested in her answer.”

She smiled as her brother lowered his glass and looked across the room to where Anne was dancing. Before any more could be said on the subject, Emma felt a gentle touch to her arm.

“There you are,” Lord Bolton said, his voice a little louder than normal.

“Anthony, I have just been wondering where you were.” Emma turned to him with a smile.

“Ah, forgive me.” He leaned towards her and took her arm within his own. It was intimate

indeed to do something so close to her in public, whispering practically in her ear. “I have indulged this evening in the gaming rooms Countess Rutherford has set up outside of the ballroom. They are quite a sight to see. I am just sorry to have missed your arrival.”

“You are here, now; that is all that matters,” she said, forcing a smile into place. Deep down, she was irked he had broken his promise by choosing to spend his time at the gaming tables instead, but she supposed she had to appreciate his honesty on this occasion.

“Your Grace,” Lord Bolton addressed her brother, standing straight again. To Emma’s mind, he looked a little unsettled on his feet compared to normal. “May I steal your sister away for a few minutes? We have a previous agreement to dance the first together.”

“By all means, steal her away,” Arthur said, gesturing to them, “enjoy your evening

together.” He was rather distracted as he spoke, with his eyes firmly still on Anne. As Emma followed Lord Bolton away, she glanced back to her brother more than once, intrigued about whether he would take her advice and speak to Anne about her decision not to marry Mr Hamilton.

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John regretted his decision to attend the ball as soon as he arrived. Standing in the opulent ballroom’s doorway, his eyes found Emma easily, out of habit. She was on the dance floor, dancing with Lord Bolton, who was circling her in a cotillion, hand in hand. John swallowed at the sight and looked away, having to remind himself of just why he had come.

If Lord Bolton was going to try and persuade Emma to share his bed tonight, then John had to run as much interference as he possibly

could.

When he spied Arthur across the side of the room, standing by the punch bowl table and sipping wine, he hurried to his side.

“I thought you said we weren’t allowed to drown our sorrows with wine anymore,” John said by way of an evening greeting. Arthur turned to him with a smile.

“I’m seriously considering changing my mind on that resolution this evening,” he said, shrugging. “Can I pour you one?”

“Not tonight, thank you,” John assured, lifting a hand in refusal. He was determined to keep a clear head tonight. “You look perplexed.” He analyzed Arthur’s expression in detail, wary of the furrowed brow and a glance he kept repeating over and over again towards the

dance floor. John followed the gaze, seeing Emma dancing, and Miss Braithwaite too. “Care to share what is wrong?”

“It is just something Emma said.” He mumbled the words, more to himself than to John at all. “I am fine,” he said quickly, turning back with a big smile and brushing off his unnerved manner. “I am here to have a good time after all.”

“Hmm,” John said, not completely in agreement as his eyes flicked to Emma. Even from this position across the room, he could see that Lord Bolton had Emma’s hand firmly in his. There was no gentle reserved touch of fingers as they circled one another, but a firm handhold, very forward indeed.

“You need to perk yourself up too, my friend.” Arthur stood in the way of the dance floor as he spoke, refusing to step out of the way again. “Stop looking and tormenting yourself.”

“How do you know who I was looking at?” John asked innocently.

“I am no fool,” Arthur said, laughing and shaking his head. “You need to be happy for Emma and cheer up now. She is to make a good match and a good marriage. That is the end of it, and you need to wish her congratulations.”

John opened his mouth to object and argue, but he closed it tightly again. He had already promised Arthur not to reiterate tonight his warnings about Lord Bolton, so that meant he had to say nothing at all. Inside his head, he could hear the rant he would make.

*How can I be happy for her when Lord Bolton is to ruin her life? Your sister is about to be involved in a scandal, and I can do nothing to stop it, for*

*you will not listen to me!*

“Let us distract ourselves and talk to some of the guests,” Arthur said and took his shoulder, steering him across the room. “Have you seen Countess Rutherford, our hostess yet tonight?”

“No, I have not,” John accepted as they walked away.

“She is grandly dressed indeed. In fact, she looks rather like a cockatoo, with a bright yellow feather on her head.” He laughed as he spoke, and John tried to join in the mirth, but he couldn’t. His gaze was slipping past Arthur’s shoulder, looking straight back towards Emma on the dance floor.

She had just finished her dance with Lord Bolton, and the two were walking away from the dance floor. Lord Bolton didn’t just have



her hand in his, but he also had another hand pressed into the small of the back. It was an intimate and bold touch in front of so many people, one that made John stiffen and clench his fists together.

As they took a few steps more away from the dance floor, Lord Bolton stumbled on his feet. Emma looked startled, leaning towards him with concern, but he brushed it off with a bold laugh, then took her hand and drew her across the room. It was not a refined movement, and it left Emma hurrying after him, casting a slightly embarrassed gaze around. As Lord Bolton reached another table full of drinks, he reached eagerly for a full bottle of wine.

“Arthur, have you seen that?” John asked, gesturing across the room.

“Seen what?” Arthur said, looking back to him and pausing in his walk. John was about to point out Lord Bolton’s strange behaviour and

how he knocked back a glass of wine when he stopped himself. He had given his word not to say anything against Lord Bolton for one night, speculating on his suspicion that Lord Bolton could be in his cups would break that promise.

“Never mind, it does not matter,” he said quickly, just as Arthur drew him forward again.

“I think the countess has just finished dancing herself.” Arthur beckoned him in the direction of the dance floor. “This way.” As they walked on, John still couldn’t take his eyes away from Emma and Lord Bolton.

His mind was working fast. With Lord Bolton possibly drinking heavily, then this evening could be the night he hoped to trick Emma into his bed. John wracked his brains for a plan, something he could do to stop it. He could not stay at Emma’s side all evening

without being warned off by both Lord Bolton and Arthur. Instead, he would have to ensure that Arthur ran interference for him.

Practically in answer to his words, he watched as Lord Bolton laid an arm around Emma's waist. At a public event such as this, it was bold indeed. She stepped out of his arm, her expression narrowing as she turned away from him and feigned interest in collecting a drink for herself.

"Arthur, I think your sister needs you," John said with a little desperation.

"What do you mean? She is fine," Arthur assured him.

"She was just looking this way in search of you," John lied, hoping it would achieve his aim.

“Did she?” Arthur asked, turning back to face Emma.

“Yes, I think you should go to her. Now.” John was only too eager to take Arthur’s arm and push him in Emma’s direction, except Arthur hadn’t gone two steps before he came to a sudden halt with John close behind him.

John peered around Arthur’s shoulder to search out the reason for the sudden halt. Someone had stepped in their way. It was Miss Braithwaite.

## Chapter 24

“Your Grace.” Miss Braithwaite dipped a curtsy to Arthur. John watched his friend closely as he moved to his side, analyzing his face in detail. He didn’t need Arthur to tell him that the source of his current heartbreak was due to the woman in front of him, for John could see it in his friend’s face.

“Miss Braithwaite,” Arthur said, bowing towards her.

John looked away, feigning interest in watching the dancers, meanwhile listening into their conversation. It was the best he could do to give his friend privacy while still chaperoning the exchange.

“How are you this evening?” Miss Braithwaite asked, her tone light. John peered at the pair out of the corner of his eye, watching as Miss Braithwaite fiddled with her gloves.

“I am well,” Arthur said, his voice deeper than normal. “I see you have been dancing this evening.”

“Between you and I, Your Grace, it was not exactly my choice,” she said softly with a small smile.

“No?” he asked, stepping towards her and creating a sort of intimacy between them.

“My mother is insistent on making me dance with every gentleman here, whether they are eligible or not, and whether they are willing or not.” She chuckled as she spoke. “You’d be wise to avoid my mother this evening, Your

Grace. I fear she is pressing many men into tight corners.”

“I would never object to dancing with you,” he said with clarity.

“You wouldn’t?” Her voice pitched high with surprise.

“Of course not,” he said. He seemed to glance John’s way, and John made a point of firmly watching the dancers again. “I understand from Emma that you refused Mr Hamilton’s proposal. Again.”

“Well, you would have thought he knew my answer after the first time, wouldn’t you?” she said, clearly working to keep her voice light and nonchalant. “As it was, he needed telling again.”

“I thought you intended to accept him?”

“I changed my mind.” Miss Braithwaite’s suddenly low tone made John turn his head slightly, to watch the pair together. “I know what you said, Your Grace,” she said as she looked down and fiddled with the gloves around her hands another time, “about us not all having a choice in who we marry. I believe you are right, but to a certain degree only.”

“In what sense?” Arthur asked. Miss Braithwaite looked up again, finding his gaze with her own.

“I have no wish to marry a man I do not love,” she said with a smile. “If that means being alone for the rest of my life, then I’d infinitely prefer that than to be married to a man like Mr Hamilton. We’d probably bore each other to tears night after night,” she said with a



chuckle. "You look startled, Your Grace."

John flicked his gaze towards his friend to see she was right. Arthur appeared rather tongue-tied, his lips parted and his eyebrows so high that they nearly met his hairline.

"In fact, you rather seem to be sharing the same expression my mother had when I told her I had refused Mr Hamilton yet again," Miss Braithwaite declared with a giggle.

"Do I?" Arthur asked, then laughed warmly. "I guess I am surprised. How can you know you would never love Mr Hamilton?"

"Because I love another, Your Grace," she said simply. Though Miss Braithwaite did not say who the other was, the silence that descended between them was plain to read. John watched his friend closely for what his

response would be. “I have no hopes of a return.” She sighed as she paused with her words. “But I am still happy with my decision.” She stopped and looked around herself. “I should move on, Your Grace. My mother will soon find me here and make me dance with another gentleman if I cannot hide first.”

“Wait,” Arthur said quickly, just as Miss Braithwaite took a step away.

“Yes?” she said, glancing back to him.

“Dance with me,” he said, reaching for her hand.

“What? Your Grace –” she looked startled.

“Dance with me,” he begged, interrupting her and taking her hand this time. “Your mother can hardly pressure you into dancing with another then, can she?” He smiled as he drew her towards the dance floor. “I wish to talk with you more.” He nodded to where John stood. “Away from where ears can hear us.”

John laughed and nodded his head in a passing goodbye, just as Arthur led Miss Braithwaite towards the door. From how Arthur was holding Miss Braithwaite’s hand tightly in his own, there could be no doubting what his affection for her was.

John smiled as he watched his friend hurry off to the dance floor. As the violin music began, they bowed and curtsied to one another, then Arthur took Miss Braithwaite in his arms, ready to dance a waltz.

As another couple moved into view, John’s smile faltered. Emma was now dancing a waltz

with Lord Bolton.

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Emma felt her smile ping back into place as Lord Bolton rested a hand on her waist and led her into their dance. Amongst the other guests, the dance floor was crowded with other couples, hiding the two of them very well. It meant when Lord Bolton lowered his hand slightly, reaching for her hip instead of her waist, she prayed no one had seen it. She lifted his hand again, placing it firmly on her waist.

“Emma, we are to be married,” he said sweetly, smiling at her charismatically.

“That we are,” she said, matching his smile, though she still glanced around her just in case any other dancers had spied the

transgression. “But we are not yet wed, and we are in public. What would you say if my brother were to see you ... moving your hand in such a way?” Emma asked, pausing long enough to think about the best choice of words to use.

“Well, I think he’s much more focused on another lady at present.” Lord Bolton gestured with his head to the side of them, to another couple across the dance floor. Emma craned her neck as she danced with Lord Bolton, the better to see just where he had gestured.

Arthur was dancing, and at first, due to the crowd, Emma could not see who he was dancing with, but she could see his face and the great smile he was wearing. He was laughing too, chuckling in a way Emma had only ever seen him do when prompted by one particular woman’s good sense of humour.

In answer to her thoughts, the crowd parted

slightly, revealing the face of the woman he was dancing with as he turned them in their waltz. He was dancing with Anne. As they twirled in each other's arms, a soft blush crept across Anne's cheeks, and she was mirroring Arthur's smile.

Emma's gaze slipped past the couple long enough to see another woman standing at the edge of the dance floor. It was Mrs Braithwaite, fanning herself incessantly as she gazed at the floor. Her lips were parted to form a perfect circle in surprise; clearly, she had never expected Anne to be dancing with the Duke of Hawksby. He was a gentleman far above her wealth and standing in society, yet from the way the two were smiling ridiculously at one another as they danced, it was plain to see that wasn't on either of their minds. The only thing on their minds was each other.

"See?" Lord Bolton said, drawing Emma's attention back to him. "If I'm not mistaken, your brother appears rather besotted."

“I think you’re right,” Emma said and smiled as Lord Bolton turned her around the floor. She longed to see both Anne and Arthur happy, and the sight of them dancing together certainly was a step toward that. “The question is now whether my brother is prepared to marry for love and not ... *eligibility*,” she elongated the word, showing her disgust of it.

“Your brother will make quite a spectacle of himself if he does marry Miss Braithwaite,” Lord Bolton said with wariness, earning Emma’s sharp gaze.

“Anthony!” she said in reprimand. “Miss Braithwaite is my friend. No other lady in society is more treasured to me.”

“So that may be,” he said. “I mean no slight

against your friend as a person, Emma, but it has to be said, her position is entirely different to your brother's. If he is to marry her, it would cause a lot of gossip."

"Then I hope my brother will be prepared to face such gossip," she spoke tightly, glancing back to her brother.

"Let us not think of that now," Lord Bolton said, moving his hand again, his hand inched just slightly across her waist, bringing her closer to him. "I would rather think of you at this moment rather than your brother and Miss Braithwaite."

"Anthony, you're being bold," she warned with a whisper, just as he moved his fingers across her back in a small circular motion. The touch made her breath hitch in surprise.



“I am,” he said, lowering his voice further, “but you are not pulling away from me. We are to be married; is there anything so wrong in expressing my desire for you?”

Hearing the words articulated so clearly made her body stiffen slightly.

“I ... erm ...” Emma felt words die in her throat. She had been excited by Anthony, yes, and was certainly curious about his frequent touches, yet this was another realm entirely. She was startled by the gut reaction that had emerged in her at his words. She was not certain she wanted to find out what his desire could lead to.

Surely, she wanted this, didn't she? She had agreed to marry him after all, and such things were expected in marriage; they were a part of it.

She looked away from Lord Bolton, searching for words as he gazed at her, watching her closely. As her eyes darted about, she found someone in the crowd, watching her just as intently. It was John with his bright blue eyes firmly fixed on her. The strength in that gaze was so sudden, so intense, that Emma felt her mind drifting. Rather than marrying Lord Bolton, she imagined what it would be like to marry John instead and experience what his desire could cause.

Her body flinched as Lord Bolton's hand moved across her waist. With her feet stumbling beneath her, she tripped and nearly fell to the floor. It was sudden and clumsy until Lord Bolton's arms came up around her, holding her safely in place.

"I've got you, Emma." He smiled down at her as he placed her on her feet again. "You don't need to worry; I'll always catch you."

To Emma's surprise, the tingle his words had left with her before did not come this time.

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John couldn't bear the sight of it. Not only was Lord Bolton taking increasing risks by moving his hand across Emma's waist and on her back in public, presuming his actions would be hidden by the crowded floor, he now had his arms firmly around her, holding her up.

John clenched his hands into fists so tightly that he could feel his fingers clicking. With horror, he watched the expression on Emma's face, wide-eyed as she gazed up at the man that was determined to condemn her and her reputation. John was crushed; he could not save her from it right now, and neither could he bear to watch Lord Bolton's advances.

With Arthur's attention elsewhere, John had no chance at using his friend to push between them either. John resolved himself to the idea that there was little he could do right now. All that watching Emma and Lord Bolton together was achieving was further heartbreak.

He turned away and walked far from the dance floor, heading towards the archway in the side of the room. He slipped through it, finding beyond a gaming room set up for the gentlemen to retire to. In this space, servants wandered around carrying glasses of brandy for men to drink. There was a smoking area in the far corner of the room, too, where men puffed cigars and pipes together.

John headed towards a table in the centre of the room where there was a space and sat down to play cribbage with some other men. To his relief, conversation was little. The gentlemen were firmly focused on playing their card game and drinking their brandies

instead.

When a servant came to offer him a drink, he refused, preferring to keep a clear head for the game, then he absorbed himself in his cards and the turn of each hand. The distraction only worked for a short time. John still turned to glance at the archway leading back to the main ballroom at the end of each round, wondering when he should appear again. He knew he couldn't stay here all night, that would be putting Emma in too much danger, but it did well to numb his broken heart for a little while.

"Fifteen for two," a man said to his left. "Come on, add it up." The gentleman was familiar as he scolded another keeping score. John fixed his attention to the man, recognizing just where he had seen him before. He was with the hunting party Lord Bolton had been on, and he shared enough of Lord Bolton's features to lead John to believe that he could well be the talked-of uncle, the only relation he had here in Bath.

“Forgive me, sir, may I enquire as to your name?” John asked, turning his attention to the man after he had finished counting up his cards.

“Woodrow Bolton,” the man said, smiling as he lowered the cards in his hands. “Marquess of Trowbridge, and yourself?”

“Duke of Pembrokeshire,” John explained to which the man suddenly sat straighter in his chair.

“Your Grace, it is a pleasure to meet you,” the man said with a simpering sort of smile.

“And you.” John nodded just as the cards were collected and shuffled again. “Are you by any

chance uncle to Lord Bolton?”

“That is correct,” the marquess said with a nod. “In fact, I’m wondering where he’s gone. He was playing earlier this evening.”

“I believe you’ll find him with Lady Colbourne,” John said coolly, returning his attention to the cards dealt out to him.

“That woman? Pah!” the marquess said and laughed heartily. “I’m surprised he hasn’t bed her yet.” John stilled completely, looking around at the other gentlemen sat at the table. They had all stilled too and looked up sharply. It was an insult to Emma’s reputation and a shocking one at that to say in such company.

“Lady Colbourne is a fine lady,” John said tightly. “You would do well not to slander her reputation.”

“You think so, do you?” The marquess laughed again. “Perhaps you do not know her as well as my nephew does.” He elbowed John. “If you understand my full meaning.” John reared away from him, ready to stand to his feet and demand recompense for smearing Emma’s name in such a way.

“Uncle? Are you in here?” another voice called from the doorway, the tone unmistakable. John snapped his head towards the voice, watching as Lord Bolton wandered into the room. He more or less stumbled into the room, evidently having drunk an awful lot more than when John had last seen him earlier in the evening.

“Here, nephew,” the marquess called back to him. “Come, take a seat.”



“I might do,” Lord Bolton said, nearly colliding with John as he barrelled towards the table. “Something tells me I certainly need to sit down for a while.”

“You’d do well to go and sober up, My Lord,” John said tightly, pushing Lord Bolton to stand again.

“I quite agree,” another gentleman said at the table. “This is disgraceful behaviour when at an event such as this.”

“Oh! Sharp tongues this evening, aren’t there?” Lord Bolton laughed heartily as he tipped to the side. He snatched his uncle’s brandy glass from the table and knocked it back, rocking onto his heels before thudding the glass down again on the table. “I will behave how I like, thank you. My reputation hardly concerns me.”

John had had enough. He took hold of Lord Bolton's arm and dragged him away from the table.

"Uncle, I seem to be being manhandled," Lord Bolton complained, chuckling away.

"Be quiet," John barked, pushing Lord Bolton all the way until they reached the door that led outside and straight onto the garden terrace. "You are making a fool of yourself, Lord Bolton," he whispered harshly. "I may not be able to stop you from pursuing my friend, but I can certainly demand you to stop disgracing yourself in this manner. Go outside and sober up. Now you are betrothed to my friend, you disgrace and embarrass Lady Colbourne as much as you do yourself this evening."

"Betrothed? Ha!" Lord Bolton pushed past John, shouldering him out of the way. John

hurried behind him, trying to keep pace as he rushed back to the cribbage table. “You actually thought that would persuade me to sober up?”

“Be quiet, Lord Bolton,” John insisted as they reached the table. The Marquess of Trowbridge laughed at his nephew, but the other faces around the table all watched with equal looks of horror and disapproval.

“In case you hadn’t realized, Your Grace,” Lord Bolton said, turning his gaze back to John as he took his vacated seat at the table. “I have no intention of marrying Lady Colbourne. Do you actually think I would marry that woman? She is merely a bit of fun, a distraction if you like. Oh dear, you do look rather horrified. Have I offended you?”

“You have offended Lady Colbourne and slandered her name,” John snapped and grabbed Lord Bolton’s collar, pulling him to

his feet again. “I demand retribution for the slander.”

## Chapter 25

Emma had been circling the dance floor, seeming as Lord Bolton had left her alone for a while. He'd claimed he needed a moment to relieve himself and would return shortly, but that had been some time ago. She found her eyes kept slipping towards the archway to the gaming tables in suspicion of maybe that was where he had escaped to, but she never caught sight of him.

Irrked to be left alone without her betrothed, she tried to distract herself by watching Arthur and Anne instead, for they were now dancing their second dance set together.

“Lady Colbourne.” Mrs Braithwaite appeared at Emma’s side. Her fan was fluttering madly, and her eyes were wide as she watched the dance floor. “Your brother is very kind to

dance with my daughter this evening. I was not aware that in your friendship Anne knew your brother very well. Are they intimately acquainted?"

"They are certainly acquainted," Emma answered uncomfortably, uncertain what to say to Mrs Braithwaite's obvious attempt to find out more about her brother's intentions.

"Has your brother danced with any other young ladies this evening?" Mrs Braithwaite asked, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"That is a question you must reserve for my brother rather than myself," Emma said nonchalantly as she stepped away, attempting to extricate herself from Mrs Braithwaite's prattling tongue. "If you would excuse me." She bobbed a quick curtsy and rounded the dance floor just as the violin music closed. Emma crossed to the other side in the hope of

intercepting Anne and Arthur together, but her aim was thwarted.

When Arthur and Anne left the dance floor, they did not walk in her direction, but instead, they crossed towards a door that led out to terraced gardens beyond the house. Emma's lips fell apart in amazement as she watched the two of them step outside, arm in arm.

Emma glanced over her shoulder a few times to ensure she wasn't being watched by Mrs Braithwaite, before she too hurried to the door and peered beyond, the better to see what was happening between her brother and her friend. With her body hidden in the shadows at the side of the room, she could peek through the glass panels of the door leading outside.

She could see the top terraced garden was patioed and lined with evergreen bushes in pots. Along the edge of the terrace was a stone

balustrade that Arthur and Anne were now leaning on. They were not the only ones who had escaped outside. There were gentlemen too, and a group of young ladies gathered together to flee the heat of the ballroom, but Arthur and Anne were the only ones amongst them that were a couple.

In the dim light that fell on them from the moon above, Emma could see Anne must have been back to her usual humour as Arthur laughed at something she said. A moment later, Arthur took a step towards Anne and took her hand in his. The move was intimate indeed, and the laughter on Anne's face vanished, replaced instantly by shock.

Emma couldn't stop the smile that spread across her cheeks as she watched the expressions of her brother and friend together. If she weren't mistaken, she rather thought her brother was making some kind of declaration of feeling. It had to be the case, for he had now pulled Anne a step further towards him, and her hand was completely encased in his.



Had the two been standing so close together, their faces inches apart in the ballroom, it would surely have been scandalous and talked of at length, but by being outside, they had managed to find a little privacy, with others outside paying them no attention at all.

Arthur paused in whatever he was saying and lifted Anne's hand towards his lips, then kissed the back of her hand. Emma could have jumped on the spot with happiness before her gaze settled on both of their faces. Anne was seconds away from tears of her own happiness, with those eyes darting frantically about Arthur's person. He was equally happy, with a kind of smile on his face that Emma had never seen before.

As Emma watched them together, she realized there was a foreign sensation within her, a kind of burn. It took a few more minutes of watching Anne and Arthur before she realized

what it was.

*Jealousy.*

She pushed away from the glass doors and strode further into the ballroom again, determined to make sense of the feeling and abandon it completely. She was betrothed, was she not? Why should she feel any jealousy at all when she supposedly had what Anne and Arthur had?

She glanced back and forth across the room, desperately looking for Lord Bolton, but was still unable to find his face in the crowd. She couldn't stop thinking of Lord Bolton's proposal and even the day when she had accepted his offer. On the latter day, she had been happy, naturally, but she hadn't been holding back unshed tears of happiness like Anne. Neither had she worn the ridiculous smile that Arthur had. Her smile had been reserved and restrained, with little feeling in

it.

Emma felt a little numb as she walked through the ballroom back towards the punch and wine table. She couldn't make sense of the feeling within her, and she didn't want to think too hard about it. She poured out a fresh glass of wine to distract herself then searched the crowd again. After a few flicks of her head back and forth, she realized she wasn't looking for Lord Bolton after all. She was looking for John.

“Lady Colbourne, there you are!” Countess Rutherford declared at her side, appearing there with three other ladies.

“My Lady.” Emma replaced the glass on the table and bobbed a curtsy to the countess, forcing a smile into her cheeks and trying to forget the sudden realization that she was looking for John. “It is a beautiful ball you are hosting this evening.”

“You are too kind,” the countess said, nodding her head and making the feathers on her hair dance with the movement. “Come, join me and my friends, for we have much to discuss.” The countess looped her arm with Emma’s and drew her towards the other three ladies. “The four of us are currently discussing what marriages we think will be made this Season,” she whispered as though it were a great secret.

“Indeed, we have,” another lady piped up from the group. This was Mrs Elaina Robertson, wife to Sir Robertson, Member of Parliament for Bath and North Somerset. Emma tried to keep an impassive face as she pondered a way to extricate herself from the other ladies, for she knew Mrs Robertson was the greatest gossip in Bath. “And don’t think we haven’t noticed your brother, the Duke of Hawksby, has danced *twice* this evening with Miss Braithwaite.”

“Twice?” Countess Rutherford repeated in shock. “Is there an understanding between them, Lady Colbourne?”

“I do not know,” Emma said, feeling very analyzed as four pairs of eyes turned to her with eagerness for an answer. “You would have to ask my brother the question.”

“If there is an understanding between them, then oh my!” Mrs Robertson said with exclamation and fluttered her fan near her face. “What a commotion that will cause.”

“Indeed.” A lady at her side joined the conversation. This was Lady Theresa Thatcher, Mrs Robertson’s sister, who was as fond of gossip as much as the former lady. “I hear Mr Hamilton was refused once again by young Miss Braithwaite. Perhaps she was holding out in the hope of winning a duke’s hand in marriage instead.”

“Lady Colbourne, you must surely be able to alleviate our curiosity.” Countess Rutherford elbowed Emma slyly. “We are old friends; you can tell us secrets.” Emma flinched with the knowledge she was being spoken to just so the ladies in front of her could pry into her friend’s affairs. She felt obligated to put their suspicions to bed. Anne was no fortune hunter, and she wouldn’t have anyone suspecting her of being so.

“My friend did reject Mr Hamilton, yes,” Emma confirmed, “but it had more to do with the two being an unsuitable match when it came to their personalities.”

“Nothing to do with a lack of fortune then?” Mrs Robertson asked, hiding her mischievous smile behind a raised glass of punch.

“Nothing at all,” Emma said sharply. Her voice

was so harsh that Mrs Robertson lowered the glass again, revealing an expression of embarrassment.

“Of course, it had nothing to do with fortune,” Countess Rutherford said with comfort, patting Emma’s hand that rested on her arm. “Miss Braithwaite is a charming and innocent girl. She is not artful in any way. Let us talk of something else instead, perhaps your own upcoming betrothal, Lady Colbourne?”

The countess’ words made Emma smile and glance around the room another time. Lord Bolton had intimated tonight would be the night they would announce the betrothal, but he was still nowhere to be seen.

“You are to be betrothed, Lady Colbourne?” Lady Thatcher asked.

“Well, I ...” Emma paused, uncertain what to say without Lord Bolton at her side.

“Lady Thatcher, I do declare you must be a little blind not to have seen Lady Colbourne’s attachment to a certain young gentleman,” Countess Rutherford said with a giggle. “Lord Bolton has scarcely spent any of his time looking at another lady since he has arrived in Bath from London.” She turned her eyes on Emma. “I expect a betrothal announcement any day now, and I do hope when the formal announcement is made that you will invite me to celebrate.”

“Surely a betrothal is not possible?” Mrs Robertson said, frowning.

“Why not?” Countess Rutherford challenged her. “Have you not seen Lord Bolton and Emma have danced together *twice* this evening. In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if there was an understanding already between



Lord Bolton and Lady Colbourne, and she is just keeping the secret close to her chest. Care to comment?" she asked, turning to look at Emma. She said nothing in response.

"That is simply not possible," Mrs Robertson said again. The somewhat harsh and insistent tone made Emma flick her head towards the woman still fluttering her fan.

"Why not?" Lady Thatcher asked calmly.

"Individuals in Lord Bolton's family have never chosen their own marriages," Mrs Robertson said with her gaze firmly fixed on Emma. "They have always been selected by consensus of the parents."

"Perhaps it is time to break tradition." Emma found her voice, but to her surprise, Mrs Robertson stepped towards her, with her voice

growing even more insistent than before.

“This family does not break tradition,” she explained quite loudly. “They have always married within the wider family and with the most affluent families in London. The Howards or the Northumberlands. They do not marry families from outside of London.”

Emma couldn't speak. For all of Mrs Robertson's gossip, she heard more tales than any other, and Emma didn't know what to think of this particular tale. Could she be right? Or was she simply peddling a story that had no truth in it?

“I am not a fan of idle gossip, Mrs Robertson,” Emma said tightly. “Especially such gossip that could hurt others.”

“It is hardly intentionally hurtful when it is a

warning,” Mrs Robertson said, closing her fan and gesturing at her. “Take warning, Lady Colbourne. I am certain of this. Lord Bolton does not have the freedom to marry who he chooses.”

Emma stared back at Mrs Robertson as all fell quiet around her. Each lady was staring at her, clearly expecting a reaction and some sort of answer, yet she had none to give. She was tongue-tied, clinging to the idea that Mrs Robertson had to be wrong.

“Emma, there you are,” Anne said, reaching her side and taking her arm. “If you would excuse me, ladies, I must speak alone with Lady Colbourne for a moment.” Emma was only too happy to take her friend’s arm and walk away from the other ladies.

“The impertinence! The rudeness! Oh, Anne, I wish you had heard what Mrs Robertson just said to me,” Emma said with speed as they

hurried off. “She just insisted that Lord Bolton was not at liberty to choose his own wife. She as good as called my betrothal to him a fantasy.”

“But she does not know about the betrothal yet, does she?” Anne said, pulling on Emma’s arm and dragging her to a stop.

“Not yet, but she clearly suspects it.” Emma lowered her voice to a whisper. “Anne, it is too awful! His name is being slandered, and he’s not even here to defend it.”

“Emma, I beg you, pause a while,” Anne declared and held up a hand, ceasing Emma’s rant. “There is something I must tell you now. Something Arthur and I have just discovered ourselves.”

“What is it?” Emma asked, feigning

obliviousness though she presumed Anne was going to tell her of Arthur's declaration outside on the garden terrace.

“We have just met a gentleman who lives in London; he is an old friend of Arthur's from university. When conversation turned to you and Lord Bolton, the gentleman exclaimed his surprise at the intimacy between you this evening.” Anne paused and took Emma's hand, clearly with concern. “He has said the same thing it appears Mrs Robertson has declared to you. He has said with confidence that Lord Bolton is a man who will not have the liberty to choose his own wife, but it is even worse than that.”

“How can it be worse than that?” Emma asked, feeling a little light-headed. It seemed she had been lied to after all. She had been tricked and deceived, but for what end?

“He claimed ...” Anne paused and stepped

towards Emma, whispering in her ear. “He claimed Lord Bolton is known in London as a drunk, seducer, and gambler.”

Emma snapped her head away, not wanting to believe it, then she closed her eyes in memory of everything she had seen tonight. It was plain to see that Lord Bolton had drunk a little, though she had presumed it was down to nerves about announcing their betrothal. It seemed she was wrong. Her eyes opened and flitted towards the doorway to the gaming rooms. No wonder Lord Bolton had spent more time in there than with her that evening.

“It can’t be possible,” she muttered as she turned back to Anne, not wanting to believe it. “He has been kind to me. Nothing changes that.”

“It may well change when you hear of his reputation as a seducer,” Anne said, whispering the words. “According to your

brother's friend, he declares that Lord Bolton was sent away to Bath for the Season for this very reason. He has compromised so many reputations of ladies in London that he was sent to stay with his uncle, hoping that he would behave himself while they work to remedy his reputation ahead of taking a wife. I fear, Emma, you have been duped."

Emma reeled on her feet, unable to take it in.

"Come, this way," Anne said and dragged her through the crowd. Emma didn't pay attention to where they were going; she was only aware of the clamour of people and the immense heat in the room that seemed to be getting hotter and hotter with each step they took.

She thought back to her time with Lord Bolton. Even from their first outing to Glastonbury Abbey, he had been bold and held her hand longer than was strictly proper. He had also nearly kissed her. Then her mind

changed to the day where she had travelled in his carriage, and he had nearly kissed her again, without a chaperone present.

“He was seducing me,” Emma said so quietly that Anne clearly didn’t hear the words in her effort to get her away from the crowd. Emma covered her mouth in shock and trembled slightly, just as they reached the side of the room. Anne pushed her down into a nearby chair and shoved a glass of wine into her hand too. “What is this for?”

“For the shock,” Anne assured her, motioning for her to drink up. Emma swallowed what was in the glass, feeling the burn at the back of her throat before turning back to Anne.

“He was pursuing me because he just wanted to share my bed, wasn’t he?” Emma asked, looking at her friend with despair. Anne’s face contorted in pain. “He made me believe he cared for me, all so that I would let down my



guard.” She hung her head forward, burying her face in her hands as she considered all that had happened that very evening. His touches had become bolder, and though she had insisted on him stepping away on occasion, she had allowed him to get away with some touches.

He had been drawing her into a trap, and she had been blindly walking into it, believing he loved her.

“He never said he loved me,” Emma realized as she sat straight again, lifting her head out of her hands.

“What?” Anne asked, hanging on her words.

“He never said it,” Emma said, turning to her friend with sudden animation. “It was always intimated, always believed, but he never

actually said it. That was all because he didn't mean it, wasn't it?"

Anne said nothing, but she nodded her head slowly, clearly believing it.

"Where's Arthur?" Emma asked, fiddling with her gloves on her hands. "I do not wish to stay here anymore tonight. I must go home."

"He has gone to find Lord Bolton. I think he intends to demand recompense for the slight to your honour."

## Chapter 26

“You demand retribution?” Lord Bolton was still laughing, despite the pressure John was now applying to the collar around his neck, pulling the cravat tight. “For Lady Colbourne? You must be jesting. Release me.”

“I will not.” John pulled tighter again. “You have damaged a good lady’s reputation. You proposed to her.” He was aware of the other gentlemen around the table gasping in surprise now, but he ignored it. The cat was out of the bag, the secret fully revealed in front of others to hear, and it was no longer a case of John’s word against Lord Bolton’s.

“I was never going to marry her,” Lord Bolton said, his expression finally registering the discomfort he was in with John’s hand at his throat. “I’m already betrothed.”

John released him, reeling at the shock of the words. He watched as Lord Bolton stumbled on his feet, tumbling to the side until he found his uncle's shoulder and grabbed it in order to stand straight. John had known of Lord Bolton's deceit, but he had not been aware the gentleman was already betrothed.

“You have disgraced Lady Colbourne and her family by proposing to her,” John insisted, taking another step towards Lord Bolton. He rounded his uncle, just as the marquess stood to his feet, putting himself between John and Lord Bolton.

“That is enough, Your Grace,” the marquess begged.

“I will not be placated!” John snapped the words, his eyes flitting to Lord Bolton now

cowering behind him. “I must demand satisfaction of the stain you have laid on Lady Colbourne’s character.”

“John!” another voice called to him. John didn’t need to turn around to know it was Arthur who was crossing the room towards him. “Don’t do this.”

“Did you not hear what he said?” John asked, darting his head back to Arthur, who was reaching out for his shoulder. “This man has just insulted your sister’s name in front of everyone.” John gestured to the others at the table, desperate for Arthur to believe him now. “He has no intention of marrying your sister. He is already betrothed to another.” At this particular news, Arthur’s gaze flicked towards Lord Bolton’s. “He has deceived your sister with the intention of ruining her name and honour.”

“I do not doubt you now,” Arthur said,

clapping John's shoulder. "I have just been warned by another friend of mine, but it is I who should be demanding recompense from this man. Not you."

"It is already done," John said, turning back. He pushed the marquess' shoulder, urging the man to step out of the way and reveal Lord Bolton again. Lord Bolton was staggering away until he fell into a chair at an odd angle, with one leg flung over the chair arm. "The matter will be settled in a duel." John let his voice echo around the room.

Everyone at the gaming tables had stopped to watch the fray. They were all staring in silence, with glasses of brandy hovering perfectly still in their hands and pipes dangling from mouths.

"A duel? Pah!" Lord Bolton laughed raucously and attempted to stand, but one prod from John sent the man falling back down into the

chair. "I have survived such duels before without an injury on me; I will happily do so again."

"Then your luck must end sometime," John insisted. "The duel is for Lady Colbourne's name, to remove the stain you have left on her character."

"Very well, in which case, I accept," Lord Bolton said, holding out his hands as he clumsily bowed within the chair. A few gentlemen around them laughed at the comical display, but they were quieted when John and others glared at them.

"Tomorrow morning." John took another step forward, forcing Lord Bolton to look up at him. "At dawn, at Prior Park gate."

"John, don't do this." Arthur grabbed his arm

and pulled him back. "Listen to me." Arthur shook his arm until John turned to look at him. "*I* should be doing the duel. It is my family's name this man has dishonoured. The duty lies with me."

"It was always my duty to protect you and your sister, Arthur," John said with honesty. "I would have done anything to defend you both, and now that time is here. I may not have been able to stop his slander against your sister, but I will remedy for that now."

"And lay your life on the line for it? No, John, don't do this," Arthur begged of him, but John just ignored him and shook his friend off his arm.

"It is already done," he said firmly and looked back down at Lord Bolton. "Tomorrow morning, dawn at Prior Park. Agree to be there, Lord Bolton."



“I agree,” Lord Bolton said, just as he beckoned to one of the servants passing by him. “Bring me another brandy,” he ordered. John wrinkled his nose in disgust, looking away to see other gentlemen doing the same thing.

“You won’t be able to shoot straight,” John muttered, feeling the repulsion grow.

“Want a bet?” Lord Bolton said with glee, smiling up at him.

“Lord Bolton, it’s time you took your leave this evening,” another gentleman said and stepped forward. “Countess Rutherford will not have her ball destroyed in this way. You have embarrassed yourself and put on quite a display this evening in front of all of us. Leave. Now.” The man took Lord Bolton by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

Lord Bolton only had long enough to down what was left in the brandy glass the servant had given him before he turned and stumbled towards the door, with the marquess on his tail. John sighed the moment he was out of the room, realizing just what he had committed himself to.

“John,” Arthur said, tapping his arm and urging him to look back to him. “Can I really not stop you from doing this?”

“You cannot,” John reiterated quietly, just as the other gentlemen lapsed back into loud whispers, all gossiping and prattling about what had occurred.

“Then I’ll be your second,” Arthur declared firmly, standing a little straighter.

“None is needed,” John assured, but Arthur would have none of it. He shook his head and waved a hand at John, urging him to stop speaking.

“It is not for negotiation. I will be there tomorrow.”

“Very well,” John agreed with reluctance as his gaze set about the other men in the room. Already some were drifting back to the ballroom, whispering amongst them. With clenched fists, John realized too late what was to occur. “The news will be around the ball within minutes.”

“Emma’s name is about to be dragged through the mud,” Arthur said, pinching the bridge of his nose in despair.

“Get her out of here.” John took his arm and steered him back towards the ballroom. “Take her home before she hears their whispers. Tomorrow morning, we’ll remove the stain on her reputation with the duel.”

“Emma’s reputation can never fully recover, can it?” Arthur asked, pausing in the doorway. “She agreed to a betrothal with a cad and seducer who openly admitted he never intended to marry her. Everyone will always suspect her of ...” he trailed off, saying no more. John froze, not wanting to say the words himself either, though he knew very well what Arthur meant. She would always be suspected now of sharing Lord Bolton’s bed.

“Take her home, Arthur,” John urged him again.

This time, Arthur left instantly, with his expression darker than John had ever seen it

before. John left through another doorway, heading back to his lodgings as fast as he could.

The journey back home on the horse was fast, with John barely noticing the dark scenery around him. All he could think of was the display Lord Bolton had made and now what had to happen the following morning.

Once he was back at his lodgings, he flung off his jacket and headed straight for the study, opening the top drawer to find the duelling pistol where he always kept it. It had been his father's before him, belonging to the last Duke of Pembrokeshire. John lifted it high in his hand, watching as the light from the candle flames glinted off its surface. It had protected his father once in a duel, and now John had to hope it would give him the same protection.

He sat down in the chair closest to the desk, resting the pistol in both hands.

“For Emma’s honour,” he whispered to himself, holding tightly onto the brass surface.

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Emma wasn’t sure how long she had been sat at the side of the ballroom clinging onto Anne’s hand when her brother appeared, but it had to have been for some time as the guests in the room were beginning to thin.

“We’re leaving, now,” Arthur said, reaching their sides as they jumped to their feet. One glance at her brother’s expression showed to Emma that something else had happened. He was pale, and his movements were both frantic and sharp, constantly fidgeting and looking about himself.

“Good, I have no wish to stay,” Emma said, stepping towards him. “What has happened?”

“Something awful,” he whispered to her, his voice constricted with evident worry. “I will explain all in the carriage, but we must go, now.” He glanced around to others in the crowd. “Before the gossip spreads too far.”

“Gossip? What gossip?” Emma asked, but Arthur was already pushing her towards the exit before he paused and looked back to Anne, boldly reaching for her hand.

“Your Grace,” Anne said, her worried face breaking briefly into a smile. “People will see.”

“I do not care,” he said firmly, holding her gaze. “I promise to come and see you and your

mother tomorrow.”

At any other time, Emma would have been over the moon to hear her brother say such a thing to Anne, but now, she was numb, and her body was trembling. She couldn't take anything in beyond the pain of Lord Bolton's deception.

“You will?” Anne asked, clinging back to Arthur's hand.

“I give you my word. Nothing will keep me away.” He winked at her then bowed just as she curtsied.

Emma shared one last sad sort of smile with Anne before her brother took her arm and dragged her away. As they reached the entrance hall, Arthur was in such a hurry to leave that they didn't even wait for the servant



to put the pelisse back over Emma's shoulders. Instead, he snatched it out of the servant's hands and bundled it under his arm as they ran out of the hallway and down the porch, toward the line of carriages outside.

"The Duke of Hawksby's carriage, now," Arthur ordered one of the manservants nearby.

"At once, Your Grace." The man nodded and hurried off to arrange the right carriage.

"Arthur, you mentioned gossip. What did you mean by that?" Emma asked, nervously following her brother across the pebbled driveway. "Arthur? Why won't you answer me?"

"Because I can scarcely believe what I myself just witnessed," he said with despair, just as

their carriage was brought forward. “Quickly, in.” As the carriage came to a stop, he helped Emma clamber inside. Once the door was shut, he struck the roof of the carriage, intimating it was time to go, and the horses lurched forward.

Emma sat on the very edge of the coach seat, struggling to move at all as she stared down at the floor.

“Mrs Robertson said the same thing your friend from London said,” she spoke slowly, unable to lift her eyes to meet her brother’s. “That Lord Bolton does not have the freedom to choose his own wife.”

“It is much worse than that,” Arthur said tightly, sitting forward on his seat too. “He is a known debaucher and drunk, Emma. My friend said as much. Good God, even John tried to warn us, and I ignored him.” These words made Emma snap her head up to look

at him. "I thought it was the ramblings of a jealous man. I ignored my closest friend's attempts to protect you. What kind of man does that make me?"

"Arthur, you were not to know," Emma said with strength, feeling a little more like herself as she sat straight in her seat. "Lord Bolton was very convincing. He was kind and gentlemanly. He sent me flowers and came to see me regularly. He was the perfect gentleman." Even as she said the words, she rejected them. Yes, he had indeed been convincing, but he had not been the perfect gentleman when he had been so forward and attempted to steal kisses.

"Emma, I need to know this." Arthur leaned forward so far that she was forced to look at him across the carriage. "I am sorry for it, but I have to ask ..." He paused and steepled his hands together across his nose. "Did Lord Bolton persuade you to ... damage your honour?"

“Arthur!” Emma snapped in outrage, pushing farther back in the seat, far away from him.

“I have to ask; it was plain tonight to see that was his intention,” he explained quickly.

“My honour remains intact, thank you,” Emma said tartly, looking away from her brother and back down to her lap again. “Lord Bolton was forward, yes, but if he intended to ... *seduce* me, then it never went that far. Of that, I can assure you.”

To her surprise, Arthur said nothing. She looked up again to see he was constantly fidgeting.

“What happened?” she asked, perceiving something was amiss. “When you went to find

Lord Bolton, something happened, didn't it?"

"I caught the tail end of the display," Arthur said, stilling in his fidgeting. "He declared openly to John and an entire room of gentlemen that he had no intention of marrying you whatsoever. That he merely pursued you for ..." He trailed off, clearly unable to say the words. "Furthermore, he said he was already betrothed to another."

Emma sat back so sharply in the carriage that she bumped her head on the wall behind her. She leaned forward again, cradling the bruise at the back of her head.

"Are you all right?" Arthur asked with concern.

"I can't answer that question right now," she said sharply, knowing he was referring to the

bump, even though she was answering how she felt inside. She was numb. She was hurt and angry at Lord Bolton's betrayal. That he could make her believe in his honest intention when there was no honesty behind it was disgusting to her. Yet was she heartbroken? No. She had never loved him. She was spurned and hurt, but not crushed.

"It gets worse," Arthur murmured, urging her to look at him again. "He slandered your name. Every man in that room will suspect now that you may well have shared your bed with him."

"Oh my God." Emma hung her head forward, burying her face in her hands.

"The stain on your character is made," he said miserably. "Before I could demand retribution for it, another did. John has challenged Lord Bolton to a duel."

“What?” She looked up so sharply that she nearly fell off the carriage seat as they took a sharp turn. She clung to the cushion beneath her, her eyes wide and fixed on her brother. “John is fighting for my honour?”

“He is,” Arthur said quietly. “I could not persuade him out of it. I am to be his second.”

Emma flung her hands over her face, stunned. John had declared he loved her, and even after her refusal to return his love, still he was here protecting her reputation. He was willing to risk his life to see her good name returned.

“He’s truly going to do this?” Emma asked slowly, elongating the syllables as she spoke. “For me?”

“I rather suspect John would do anything for you.” Arthur sighed as he sat back in the seat, resting his head on the carriage wall.

Emma didn't know what else to say. Silence fell between the two of them, but Emma's mind was no longer on Lord Bolton's betrayal; it was on John. He had tried to persuade her that Lord Bolton was no good, and still, she hadn't listened. The memory of what John had said when they last parted ways burned in her mind.

*“If he ever hurts you, and if you ever need help, you know where to find me.”*

He suspected what was going to happen and had tried to warn her. Without her listening, he had done the next best thing and showed her he would be there for her, no matter what.



“Lord Bolton will shoot away, won’t he?” Emma asked, pleading to the hope. “He is the one that made the slander; it would be only right. The gentlemanly thing to do!” she insisted, yet Arthur’s stony look argued against it.

Emma couldn’t stand the idea of John being hurt, all for her sake. Awful images flashed in her mind, where John was bleeding on the ground, shot and dying all because of Lord Bolton’s cruelty. The thought of John dying was gut-wrenching and made Emma buckle forward, pressing both hands to her chest. She loved him. She still loved him, despite her attempts not to do so. She knew that with certainty now.

“Lord Bolton has already proved there isn’t a gentlemanly bone in his body,” Arthur said quietly. “He *should* shoot away. Whether he will or not is another question entirely.”

## Chapter 27

The garden of Prior Park was encased in mist as John arrived, flanked by Arthur at his side. They were walking towards the tall bridge that passed over the edge of a lake in the parkland. On a clear morning, there was a view over the skyline of Bath, but not today. The mist was as thick as soup, masking the view completely. All that John could see was the outline of the tall yellow-stone bridge and the gentle surface of the lake beside him, appearing more of a dull grey than blue at all, like dirtied glass.

“He’s not here,” Arthur said as they reached the gate of the bridge beside the water.

“Give him time,” John said with certainty. “That man is too proud to refuse a duel.” He knew it to be true. He had seen it time and

time again in Lord Bolton's words and actions over the last few weeks how proud he was. He genuinely believed he was untouchable in his attitude towards not only Emma but anyone else he came across. He would not take a challenge to his name lightly.

In the distance, two silhouettes began to appear, moving through the mist.

"I told you," John said and pointed in their direction. Arthur muttered a curse under his breath before turning to stand in front of John, blocking off his view momentarily.

"Don't kill him, John," Arthur said quietly. "Kill him, and you'll be done for murder. I can't let that happen."

"I'm not a killer, Arthur," John said, reaching under his jacket to where he had hidden the

pistol. He revealed it and began to load it, pressing the wadding and the shot down into the gun's barrel. It was a well-rehearsed action. As a boy, his father had taught him to shoot down at the Montacule estate. He could remember well shooting haybales in the stable yard for practice. At university, he and Arthur had practiced shooting a lot too, but he had never had cause to shoot in a duel before. "Emma's reputation has to be repaired. You don't expect me to abandon this now."

"You and I both know that nothing short of Emma marrying another will protect her now after last night," Arthur muttered harshly. "Whispers will be all over Bath about Lord Bolton's false proposal to her, and they will suspect her of falling into his trap."

"We'll discuss marriage later," John said, already knowing what he was going to do if he made it out of Prior Park alive. Arthur's face shifted in surprise.

“You intend to propose to her?” he asked, wide-eyed.

“She can refuse me if she wishes to,” John said plainly, holding his friend’s gaze, “but no one will protect her as I will. I cannot stand aside and watch you force her into a marriage with a complete stranger either just to cover up her ruined reputation. I’ll ask her to marry me.”

“*If* you live through this,” Arthur said tightly, walking around him to stand behind him.

The two silhouettes were moving closer now, their wobbly figures becoming clearer to see in the mist.

“Do I have your blessing?” John asked, looking over his shoulder as he held the pistol down by his side.

“You do.” Arthur sighed with the words. “In return, there’s something I want of you.”

“What is that?” John asked.

“Your forgiveness.” Arthur’s words brought him up short, and John turned to him, frowning.

“Whatever for?”

“I ignored you when you tried to warn me of Lord Bolton’s character,” Arthur said quietly. “I thought you were merely jealous and that I could not trust your word. Forgive me for it? I should never have doubted your word.”

“Lord Bolton may be a charlatan, but he’s a convincing one,” John said with feeling as he turned away to face the approaching silhouettes again. “I do not blame you for believing his charade in the slightest.”

The two of them fell into silence, watching the approaching figures. Little by little, two men appeared. One was Lord Bolton, with his hair stuck up at strange angles, wearing the same clothes he had been wearing the night before with the buttons misaligned and the cravat all askew. He could barely walk straight with his legs plaiting beneath him.

“He’s still drunk,” Arthur said loudly.

“Indeed, I am!” Lord Bolton raised his arms, clearly having heard the words. He nearly stumbled on a rock until the gentleman at his side grabbed his arm and set him straight. John recognized Lord Bolton’s second. He was

one of the gentlemen that had been at the hunting party, but unlike his friend, he appeared to be completely sober and more than just a little unhappy at the turn of events.

“I beg you to change your mind about this, Anthony,” the friend muttered, but Lord Bolton shrugged off his hold.

“I’m here for a duel, and a duel we will have,” he said and burped. John and Arthur both wrinkled their noses and looked away.

“Let’s hope his intoxication means he can’t shoot straight,” Arthur whispered to him.

“Let us pray it is so,” John agreed before shedding his jacket and passing it to Arthur to hold.



As they were up in the early hours of the morning, the breeze was cold, and John could feel it buffeting his shirt sleeves as he rolled them up to his elbows. Opposite him, the same breeze seemed to nearly knock Lord Bolton over as he staggered on his feet.

With some evident reluctance, Lord Bolton's friend was preparing a pistol.

"If a constable arrives, we will all see prison for this," the man said clearly.

"I'm happy to risk it," Arthur said sharply, resting his gaze on Lord Bolton.

"As am I," John agreed with him.

“Constables rarely concern themselves with duels,” Lord Bolton said, trying to take the gun from his friend. “My duels in London were never caught.”

“How many ladies’ names have you slandered only to find yourself in this same position?” John asked, watching as Lord Bolton rested the gun over his shoulder and turned back to face him.

“Well, just a few,” he said with a smirk that suggested he was lying.

“The rules are as follows,” his friend said, adopting the formalities. “The shot shall be made at twenty yards. Any objections?”

“None,” John said, turning his eyes on Lord Bolton and staring with all the menace and anger he could muster.

“The shots will be taken at the same time,” the friend said next, to which John nodded in agreement, setting his hand firmly on the pistol’s trigger.

“Yes, yes, we know the rules.” Lord Bolton yawned. “Let’s get on with it. I need some rest.”

John bit his tongue, tempted to hurl insults at Lord Bolton’s blatant disregard for an event meant to restore honour, but he restrained. Such things would not help Emma’s honour now.

“Take your positions,” Arthur said, glancing once at John. He saw the concern in his friend’s eyes before turning away, keen not to look at it again.

John and Lord Bolton took up their places standing by the lake's edge on the grassy bank, then turned from one another and walked twenty yards away. As John looked back, he marvelled at how thick the mist was that morning. Even at this short distance, Lord Bolton's face was now a little more difficult to discern. The sun was rising higher in the sky, and it began to shine down in streaks through the mist, making the whole sight ethereal.

“Raise your weapons,” Arthur said, moving to the side and out of the way of the firing line.

John lifted his pistol first, staring down the barrel at Lord Bolton. His hand didn't shake, neither did he waver in his grasp. He was certain of his intent today. He would injure Lord Bolton and remedy Emma's reputation. If that meant being hurt in the process, then he was happy to take the pain.

“Anthony, lift the pistol,” his friend said tiredly. Lord Bolton laughed at himself before planting his feet in the ground, evidently struggling to stand still before raising his own pistol. From the way he wavered on his feet, John wondered if the man would be able to fire at all.

“On my count,” Arthur said slowly. “One ...”

John stared down the barrel at Lord Bolton, feeling all the anger from the last few weeks make his breath faster and faster. He could clearly picture Lord Bolton with his hunting party, leering over Emma, and the awful comments he made the night before. He deserved his punishment.

“Two ...” Arthur said, his voice deeper and graver than usual.

Lord Bolton was attempting to stand still as he jerked his chin upward a little more, the barrel of his gun lifting and pointing straight at John.

“Three,” Arthur said the final word sharply.

John pulled the trigger, aiming straight for Lord Bolton’s shoulder. The wound would be devastating, but he would survive fine. John felt the explosion from the pistol and absorbed the recoil with bent arms, yet Lord Bolton had not fired.

His eyes had gone a little glacial as in his drunken state he staggered to the side, out of the firing line. The bullet grazed his arm.

“You are not to move, Lord Bolton!” Arthur snapped the words. “It’s against the rules of a duel. Stand your ground.”

Lord Bolton's free hand went to cover the wound John had caused. The sleeve of his jacket was torn open, and a small amount of blood was trickling down his arm, but not very much.

"Shoot away, Anthony," his friend insisted. "Shoot away, and let's have done with this. It is the right thing to do."

"Listen to your friend, Lord Bolton," Arthur insisted, yet Lord Bolton didn't seem to be listening to what either of them was saying.

John lowered his pistol and felt his body stiffen. His shot had been taken, by right, he could take no more. Lord Bolton glared back at him, with the same wicked look in his eye that John had witnessed the day he'd trailed Lord Bolton into the gambling hall.

The pistol in his hand was raised a second time and pointed straight at John.

“Shoot away, Anthony!” his friend roared the words.

John heard the shot fired and saw the smoke emitting from the gun's barrel as it melded with the mist around them. It took a beat for him to register the pain – it was scorching as it ripped across the top of his skull.

He staggered back on his feet, the pistol in his hand dropping to the floor. He was aware of shouts and bellowing orders, but he couldn't take any of them in. He fell back on the grass, one hand falling in the wet lake while the other went flat to the earth beneath him.



The pain in his head was sharp, thudding, and matching the heartbeat in his ears.

Arthur's face appeared above him, stricken so much with panic that the sinews of his neck and cheeks were taut and strained. He was shouting, calling to John, though he couldn't catch the words.

Spots appeared in John's vision, and everything began to darken, just as he could finally hear Arthur's voice above the heartbeat echoing in his ears.

"Stay with me, John. You have to stay awake now. Good God, you cannot die because of that man."

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Emma had been fretting all morning. Before dawn when Arthur had prepared to leave the house, she had dressed herself and stood by the door waiting for him, but he had refused to let her go with him, insisting it was not a place for a lady, least of all for the lady whose name had been wronged. She had argued with him, but in the end, Arthur insisted on going alone, and she had to watch with despair as he left to take his horse out of the town.

Now, Emma was certain she was wearing tracks in the drawing room floor from how many times she had paced up and down in the room.

“Would you like tea, My Lady?” The voice made Emma snap her head to the doorway. She had been so lost in her own thoughts and fears that she had not been aware that she was no longer alone. The butler was standing in the doorway, looking at her with more than a little fear. She didn’t doubt that it was already

around all the household staff that Arthur had left early that morning carrying a duelling pistol.

“Y-yes, thank you,” Emma said a little shakily. The moment the butler bowed and was on his way, she returned to her pacing up and down.

She was certain she hadn’t slept at all in the night. Instead, she had laid awake, thinking of John and what he was about to do for her.

The pain she had felt at Lord Bolton’s betrayal was sharp but not as great as her fear for John and how she would feel if something happened to him. That would truly be crushing and beyond what she could bear.

“He’ll be fine,” she muttered to herself, wishing she could believe it as she turned and paced back the other way, fidgeting so much

with her hands that her fingers were beginning to hurt. “He’ll live through this, and Lord Bolton will shoot away. He has to.”

Before she could persuade herself of anything else, there was a sound beyond the window. Emma ran back to the window, pressing her face so much against it that she could feel the coldness of the glass against the top of her nose and forehead.

Two horses had come to a stop outside the house; atop one of them was Arthur, and atop the other, someone’s body was flung across the saddle.

“No ...” Emma pleaded, clutching onto the window frame.

Arthur jumped down from his horse just as the door to the house was flung open.

“Get everyone, now!” Arthur ordered. “As many footmen as you can.”

Emma was petrified, her body still as she stared at the scene. Footmen ran forward, out of the doorway and down the porch steps, where Arthur helped them to pull the body off the horse. As he was lowered down, his face was plain to see. It was John.

Emma jumped into action, leaping away from the window and running through the house until she reached the entrance hall. John was carried through the front door simultaneously, with three different footmen and Arthur holding him up. Emma covered her mouth as she saw the blood trickling down John’s head and across his cheeks. The wound had to be great indeed.

Lord Bolton had not shot away.

“Order a physician, now!” Arthur bellowed the words, and maids around them jumped into action. “You, get a room set up with some fresh water.” He nodded his head to the housekeeper.

“The room at the top of the stairs.” Emma found her voice and pushed ahead of Arthur carrying John, heading straight for the staircase. “We’ll prepare that one.” She had to do something, for it seemed John’s life was in jeopardy, and no good could come from being petrified to the spot with her fear.

As she reached the top of the stairs, she helped the housekeeper to open the room. They flung open the shutters across the windows and pulled on fresh bedsheets. As two maids hovered at the side of the room, Emma issued more orders.

“Mary, build a fire.” At her words, the youngest of the two maids set about building a fire in the large grate beside her. “Alison, fresh towels and anything you can find from the medicine cupboard in the kitchen. Bandages, cloths, honey, turpentine, laudanum, everything!”

Alison nodded and hurried out of the room, just as John was appearing through the space, carried by Arthur and the footmen. John was laid down on the bed where Arthur jumped into action, pulling off John’s boots before throwing one of the blankets over his body.

Emma pulled the blanket up tight around John’s neck before kneeling on the side of the bed, the better to look at him. He was bleeding profusely from somewhere in his hairline, and his eyes were tightly shut, completely unconscious.

Her hand reached for John's, pulling it out of the blankets as she pressed her fingers to his wrist, searching for a pulse.

"Please tell me he is still alive, Emma," Arthur begged as he stood at the end of the bed.

"He is," Emma said, startled to find the pulse was strong beneath his skin. Instead of releasing his hand, she clung onto him even tighter than before. "Lord Bolton shot him?"

"The disgrace," Arthur muttered, followed by a string of curses. "He staggered away to avoid his own shot, against the rules, he says because he was drunk. John just nicked him in the arm. His second was calling for him to shoot away, but he didn't. He fired. Straight at John's head."



Emma felt the threat of tears come now. Her throat constricted completely and her eyes tingled from the sheer strength of those tears.

“He can’t die, Arthur,” she mumbled as she looked back down at John and his face that still wouldn’t move.

“I’ll collect the physician myself,” Arthur said and strode towards the door, closing it loudly behind him.

Emma knew she was in the room with one of the maids who could overhear her, but she didn’t care. She leaned down towards John and tried to mop away some of the blood from his cheeks with her handkerchief as she whispered to him.

“You have to live through this, John,” she begged him quietly. “I cannot watch you die

now. I love you.”

## Chapter 28

John's attempts at opening his eyes were futile at first. He was aware of a floral scent in the room and the smell of ash, too, from some fire. He was sure he could feel its heat as well, so he couldn't be on the grass at Prior Park anymore. He was in a house.

A damp cloth was pressed against his temple, mopping away something. The sudden touch made him flinch in the bed; then he heard a gasp, a woman's gasp.

This time his eyes opened. John blinked a few times, looking around himself to see what was happening. He was indeed in a room, and he recognized it well. It was one of the guest rooms in Arthur's house. He could recognize the four-poster bed and the cream curtains fastened tightly against each post, along with

the white furniture spread around the room and the large fireplace beside him.

What he had not expected to find was the woman holding the damp cloth to his head. He blinked a few more times, just in case he was dreaming and imagining she was there when she wasn't at all, only she didn't disappear. Emma stayed exactly where he could see her, sat on the bed beside him with a hand on the cloth at his temple. Slowly, she retracted her hand and pulled the cloth away with her.

"You're awake," she whispered, her face spreading into a smile.

"Emma." He managed her name and reached for her hand. The moment he moved, the thumping in his head grew worse. He let out a groan of pain and placed both his hands against his temple instead.

“Careful,” she urged him, louder this time. “You might tear open our physician’s stitches.”

“Stitches?” he repeated as he parted his hands to see her pulling on his shirt sleeves, urging him to look at her again.

“He has already been and gone. He spent some time with you this morning.”

“What did the physician say?” he asked. “I truly thought I was dead, laying on the grass.”

“Do you remember what happened?” she asked, tilting her head to the side and watching him carefully. Her features were softened in the strong sunlight of the day, and John found himself reaching for her, though his hands died just before he touched her. He

couldn't believe he was waking up to find her nursing him, sitting with him on the same bed. It felt like a dream. "John, do you remember?"

"Yes, a little," he said, trying to concentrate on her words. "I remember firing and Lord Bolton staggering away. The coward," he muttered, startled to find Emma smiling at his derision of Lord Bolton. "Then he fired. My head hurt, and I hit the floor. That's all I remember."

"He shot to kill, John," she said, her voice constricted. John looked to her eyes and finding them watery, he was desperate to move at last. He urged himself to sit up in the bed, wincing at the pain that thumped across his skull. Emma fluffed pillows behind him to help him. It gave him the opportunity to take one of her hands and pull it into his grasp, holding tightly onto her.

"You're crying," he whispered, watching her intently as one tear slipped down across her

cheek.

“I’ve done that a lot this morning,” she acknowledged. “I thought you were dead, John.” As she used his first name again, his fingers tightened around hers. All barriers had gone between them now.

“I thought I was too,” he admitted. “What did the physician say?”

“That you were remarkably lucky!” The strength in her voice and the evident relief pulled a smile from him. “The bullet grazed your skull, which is why there was a lot of blood. Yet it never lodged itself in you, it passed straight across, and there is no permanent damage. The physician put in a couple of sutures to stop the bleeding, but it was the impact of the bullet that put you into shock and knocked you out. He has given you some laudanum for the pain. He says you will make a full recovery within days, but you may

have a scar forever more into your hairline.”

“A scar?” he asked. “Well, that I can live with. That monster.” He leaned forward, placing both hands over her one now. “He had the chance to save something of his own reputation by shooting away, and he didn’t.”

“The news we think is already all over town,” Emma said quietly.

“How do you know that?”

“For starters, our staff has prattling tongues,” she said, sighing. “But I believe Lord Bolton’s second may have spread the word too. According to Arthur, he was not happy about his friend’s actions. As he dragged Lord Bolton away, his second was shouting about how people would hear of this. He also told Lord Bolton in no uncertain terms that any



friendship between them had vanished as of that moment. The express messages of condolences we have received this afternoon show that many people know of what happened this morning already.”

“Unbelievable,” John said and sat back on the bed, sinking into the pillows. He couldn’t let go of Emma’s hand; he had no wish to ever let go of her again. “At least people will know of Lord Bolton’s true colours now.”

“John,” she said as another tear slipped down her cheek.

“Emma, why are you crying?” he asked, releasing her hand and reaching for her cheeks. To his surprise, she didn’t lean away; she let him cradle her head within his grasp as he used his thumbs to dry her tears.

“Look at you,” she said through her tears. “You could have died this morning, all in my name, and you ask why I am crying?”

“Ah, I guess I didn’t think about it like that,” he said with a small smile.

“You fool!” she said firmly as another tear spilled out. “You should not have done that for me.”

“There was never any hesitation in my mind.” He matched her strength in tone. “I would have died for you to protect you from that man.”

“John,” she closed her eyes as more tears slipped out and hung her head forward. John sat up, reaching for her. He brought them closer together as he lowered his hands from her cheeks to her arms, holding onto her. “I

can never thank you enough.”

“I do not need thanks,” he said, shaking his head. “Where is Arthur?” he asked. “I must thank him. He was the one who got me out of there; I must tell him my gratitude.”

“I expect he will be back soon,” she said, lifting her head for him to see her beautiful face twisted in pain. Then the pain alleviated slightly, and a small smile was revealed. “He had a matter of his own to see to it would seem. He has gone to see my friend, Anne, and her mother.”

“Miss Braithwaite?” John said with a smile of his own. “It was evident to see last night your friend is the source of his own suffering. Is he going to propose?”

“I asked if he was as he walked out of the

door,” Emma said, giggling softly. “He refused to answer me, which I think is as good as a yes. It seems my brother has finally surpassed his obsession with one marrying for *eligibility*. It seems he intends to marry for love, after all.”

“You say the word eligibility as if it is awful to you,” John pointed out, watching her closely.

“That’s because it is,” she said, lifting her gaze to meet his. “Arthur kept using the word whenever we discussed Lord Bolton, how he was an *eligible* match for me and that I should take that into account when deciding whether or not to accept his proposal.”

“You wavered?” John asked, seeing a glimpse of hope as he inched towards her.

“I did,” she acknowledged, still holding his

gaze.

“I am so sorry he hurt you, Emma,” he said with animation. “Lord Bolton never deserved your affection, and I am so sorry that he has broken your heart –”

“My heart is not broken,” she interrupted him.

“I beg your pardon?” John asked, startled by her words.

“My heart is not broken,” she said again.

“But...” he paused, unable to make sense of her statement. “You agreed to marry him. I thought you had to love him.”

“I agreed to marry him because I was persuaded into thinking it was the right choice for my life,” she spoke quietly, as though nervous of revealing the words. “I was flattered by his attention, that I would not deny, and though I liked his kindness, now I know all that kindness was just an act, and the man I thought I liked never existed. Any care I had in that direction has been replaced with the horror that it was all a lie.”

“Emma,” John lowered his hands to take one of hers again. He lifted it to his face and kissed the back of her knuckles. “I am so sorry he hurt you.”

“He has offended me, but he has not wounded me, John,” she spoke with sincerity, urging him to look over her hand to her gaze. “I always loved another,” she whispered. “Even though I denied it to myself.”

The way she held his gaze, unblinkingly and refusing to look away, gave John all the hope he had abandoned over the last few weeks.

“Can I confess something to you?” he asked with a smile, just as she stopped her tears and dried them with the back of her free hand.

“Of course,” she said, prompting him on.

“It has always been something of a dream of mine to wake up to seeing your face beside me,” he said with complete honesty. She smiled instantly, looking up to him as she paused with drying her tears. “Now it has happened, I feel like I am still in that dream. Well, I would do if it wasn’t for the thumping headache.” His words lightened the moment, and she laughed through the last of her tears.

“I suppose I should stop being so nervous

around you now. I should have the freedom to tell you that it was a dream of mine too,” she said, looking away from him bashfully, down at their hands that were still entwined.

“It was?” he asked.

“It was,” she confirmed, looking up to him another time.

“Then ... am I foolish to hope that I am not too late to gain your affection now?” he asked, watching as her lips turned up into a smile. “I know a lot has passed and that you must think me a great fool, but do I have the chance now of earning your affection?”

“It is not just affection, John,” she whispered, moving towards him on the bed. “I think I have been in love with you for some time.”



Overwhelmed, he reached for her, wanting to feel Emma in his arms, but she pressed a hand firmly against his chest, holding him in place with a smile on her face.

“But that still does not mean I understand why you were such a buffoon!” she said with vigour.

“Buffoon?” he repeated, laughing.

“Yes, you have loved me all this time, and yet you never could admit it until I was practically betrothed to another,” she said quickly.

“Well, that was an error –”

“What about refusing to dance with me when you said you loved me? You could have had everything you wanted then, and still, you shot yourself in the foot.”

“I explained that,” he said. “I was afraid of getting a broken heart.”

“You ended up with one anyway.”

“Well, I wasn’t to know that at the time, was I?” he said, watching as she still laughed at him.

“Then you go and nearly get yourself killed, all in the name of protecting my honour,” she said, prodding him in his chest. “Yes, you are a fool and a great buffoon indeed.”

“Yet you still love this buffoon?” he asked with a tease, laughing as she playfully tapped him around the arm.

“It seems I do,” she said, controlling her mirth. “You still should have told me how you felt before all this, then none of it needed to happen.”

“I could ask why you never told me you cared for me,” he said, watching her reaction carefully. Her lips parted before she clamped them shut firmly and narrowed her gaze at him.

“It was not so simple,” she explained slowly.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because I was afraid that I was a fool in ever hoping for anything to happen between us.”

“Then you know exactly how I felt,” he said with a smile, watching as she looked back at him.

“I suppose I do.” She sighed with resignation. “When you declared you loved me, even then, I didn’t know whether to trust you loved me.”

“Do you trust me now?” he asked, clutching her hand tighter than before.

“After you risked your life for me?” she said and gestured to his head wound. “How could I ever doubt that again. I know you love me now.”

“Then while Arthur is out and before he arrives back to interrupt us, let me ask something of you, Emma.” He was pleading with his words, watching as her smile faltered; clearly, she was taking the hint at what it was he wanted to ask her.

“John, wait,” she said, placing a hand on his chest to stop him from leaning towards her all the more.

“Why should I wait?” he asked, perplexed. “You know I love you, and you have just declared that you love me too.”

“Because you need to be aware of what you are asking before you ask it,” she spoke with apparent nerves as she bit her lip and looked down at their joint hands. “My name is tarnished now, John. While your duel has gone some way to remedying the wrong against my reputation, tongues will always tattle. There will be many a person in Bath

who will slight my name. You need to know that before you ask your question. You need to know that you are asking to tie yourself to someone whose reputation is dulled.”

“I am not asking to marry a reputation.” With his words, her gaze snapped up to his again. “Now, stop pulling away from me,” he said teasingly, reaching for her again. This time, she didn’t pull away at all. She let him pull on her hand until she was sitting against him with their heads close to one another. “I already have your brother’s blessing, too, in case you were wondering.”

“You do?” she asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

“I asked him before the duel,” he said, earning another playful tap from her across his arm.

“You were about to die, and you asked that!?”

“Of course, I did,” he said, smiling. “It was a good job I did because I didn’t die.”

“Thank God, for that,” she said, casting her eyes to the heavens momentarily before looking back down to him.

“So, here is my question,” he said, swallowing past his nerves. He no longer needed to be afraid of her rejection. He’d gone through everything to get to this moment, through all the pain of seeing her with another man and the agony of seeing her tarnished by that same man, only to discover she had loved him too all along. Now, everything could be settled between them. “Marry me, Emma,” he asked her, leaning towards her.

“Yes, John,” she said, gasping just as he

neared her. He was going to kiss her; he was seconds away from it when he heard footsteps in the corridor and a voice he knew well.

“Is he awake? Does anyone know?” Arthur was calling to a maid.

“Your sister is in there with him, Your Grace.”

“Alone!?” Arthur said, his voice pitching high.

“I best retreat.” Emma giggled and pushed away from John, turning to stand from the bed. John sat back on the pillows just as Arthur flung open the door and stumbled into the room.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re awake,” Arthur said, smiling as he walked into the room. “But



... you still should have had a chaperone.” He narrowed his eyes at John, but John could only smile in reply. “I’m surprised you look so happy after the blow to the head.”

“She said yes,” John said, watching as Arthur’s eyes widened before turning to his sister.

“Did you now?” he asked, and Emma nodded. “Well, that’s two betrothals in one day.”

“What?” Emma asked, hurrying forward. “You asked Anne to marry you?”

“That I did,” he said, opening his arms as his sister went to embrace him. “Shall we send for some champagne? John, you’re sticking with laudanum for now.”

## Epilogue

“Let us pray,” the vicar said, his gravelly voice echoing around the vaulted ceilings of the church. In his long white robes with the emerald, green drapery around his shoulders, he stood in front of the congregation, shimmering in the sunlight through the stained-glass windows.

As everyone bowed their heads, including the vicar standing before them, Emma stole a glance at the man beside her instead, only to find he was staring back at her.

They were by the altar in the church of the village on the edge of the Montacule estate. Behind them, the pews were not only full of their friends from Bath, but from the country too, all gathered to see them wed. Across the altar, summer flowers dappled the Christian

crosses, with lots of small white roses and large white peony heads. Along the sides of the pews too, there were evergreen leaves and more white roses.

Emma had barely taken her eyes off John since she had entered the church that morning. As she had walked down the aisle, ready for the ceremony to begin, she had found John waiting impatiently for her, fidgeting as he stood.

Now, he was perfectly calm beside her, wearing the ring on his finger that she had given him, just as she was wearing the diamond ring he had bestowed upon her. He had dressed finely indeed with his midnight blue coat and dark breeches. The waistcoat was the same colour blue as his eyes, inlaid with soft swirls. He was very handsome, and Emma was somewhat distracted from the vicar's prayer.

“Oh, eternal God, creator, and preserver of mankind. Send thy blessing upon this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy name, so that they live faithfully together, that they will perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made today. May their love ever remain perfect, and may they be in peace together, according to thy laws.”

Emma could see John's eyes drifting down to her clothes too. She had a bouquet of peonies and roses collected from her brother's estate in her hand, all bright white, as white as the dress she was wearing. Ivory in colour and hemmed with pastel pink embroidery, it was a beautiful gown covered in lace with a long train strewn behind her. Her hair was bundled high at the top of her head, allowing just a few auburn curls to trail down the back of her neck.

As John lifted his eyes to hers again, they shared a smile, and he reached for her hand. She released the bouquet to take hold of his fingers, locking their hands together. It was a

stolen moment of intimacy in front of the formal ceremony, one that made her heart lurch with excitement.

They were finally being wed.

It had been just a month since the duel. Thanks to the tarnish on Emma's name, it was agreed it was best to have a wedding quite quickly and outside of Bath centre, though Emma hadn't come across a single person who would slander her name to her face. Instead, her true friends had emerged and stood by her side.

At this thought, she glanced back over her shoulder to find Arthur and Anne sitting at the front of the pew, with her mother beside them. Her mother was fluttering a handkerchief in her face, warding off tears. Anne had her arm through Arthur's as they both watched the service. Their own wedding was due to take place in three weeks' time, in

the same church and with a similar congregation of friends. In the pew immediately behind, Anne's mother, Mrs Braithwaite, was there too, with an over-the-top smile pinned on her cheeks.

“In Jesus Christ, our Lord,” the vicar said, calling her attention back to the front, “amen.”

The vicar looked up again with the words, bestowing a kindly smile on the two of them.

“At this point, I usually join the couple's hands,” he said and placed a hand under their clasped palms, before lifting it with his fingers for all to see, “but it seems they are incapable of staying away from each other and have already done the job for me.” In response, there was a soft giggle around the room. Emma blushed as she looked back at John, finding his gaze still intently on her.

Since their betrothal, she had been startled by the change in John. He was always happy now, and any of those old cold moments from him that she had experienced before never resurfaced again. In their place, there was excessive warmth, friendship, and devoted love. They spent most of their time together, talking at length about their passions and interests.

Barely a week had passed where new gifts from John hadn't turned up. They were mostly historical books, tales that he knew Emma loved to read. The fact he knew her so well, always to manage to buy the perfect gift for her was a testament to his love.

There were other gifts too amongst the literature, fine chocolates, and wildflowers too. Each gift he ever gave managed to be more thoughtful and somehow bring her more happiness than Lord Bolton's gifts had ever done.

“What God hath joined,” the vicar declared loudly, “let no man put asunder.”

At the words, Emma thought briefly of Lord Bolton and how he had very nearly destroyed their happy lives together. She'd heard little of Lord Bolton since the duel. After his name was dragged around town and the cruelty with which he behaved in the duel made known, his uncle had packed him back off to London.

There some say he remained, under the watchful eye of his mother. Others declared they'd heard rumours of him being sent to Cumbria, far into the countryside and away from affluent society where he could tarnish any other ladies' names.

“My friends, please would you welcome your duke and the new duchess of Pembrokeshire, John and Emma Kennerley,” the vicar said and



lifted his hand to the congregation. At once, the people erupted in applause, clapping eagerly.

John turned Emma around and looped her hand through his arm, holding tightly onto her. They smiled at one another before turning to look at their friends and family looking back at them. As the applause paused a little, John took the opportunity to speak.

“For those of you who can spare the time, the wedding breakfast is at Montacule,” he said, speaking clearly. “Please, join us there to celebrate.” The applause followed again, and Emma was drawn forward, down the aisle of the church. She found it harder and harder to tear her eyes away from John with each step she took.

They were married at last. Each childish dream and hope she’d ever had now somehow become a reality. It was as though she were

living those dreams, and she feared waking from them at any moment.

As they reached the church doors, they pushed them open to find the small church lane covered with people from the village. Amongst them, faces were smiling, and kids were throwing flower petals on the ground for them to walk over.

“It’s the children from the new school,” John whispered to her as he led her down off the church step.

“It is?” she asked, looking around at all their happy faces.

“And there’s the new teacher,” he said and pointed to the woman alongside them who was urging them all to cheer as loudly as possible and throw more flower petals.

“I think you made them all very happy, John,” she said, squeezing his arm as they walked past them, smiling at all the little faces.

“There is more I wish to do for them, but I hope you will help me with that,” he said, squeezing her arm back.

“I’d be delighted to,” she said as they stopped at the end of the lane.

“Throw the bouquet!” the teacher’s voice called as they came to a stop. Behind them, others had now left the church too. Emma’s mother was amongst the guests, along with Arthur and more of their friends.

“Throw it?” John asked in surprise.

“It is a tradition where I come from,” the teacher said kindly. “Apparently, whoever catches it will be wed next.”

“Well, I rather like that idea,” Emma said and turned away from the crowd. “Get ready,” she called, then threw the bouquet over her head and into the air. There was a gasp of surprise and lots of laughter.

“Watch out!” one person cried.

“Catch it, quickly.”

“She’s got it.”

Emma looked around as her mother stepped to the side, revealing just who had caught the bouquet. Anne stood there, looking down at the bouquet in her hands with clear surprise.

“I wasn’t even trying to catch it,” Anne said quickly with a laugh.

“How fitting,” Arthur said as he took her hand in his own. The smile the two of them shared was so familiar to Emma now, as it was a smile that she always shared with John too.

She turned back just as John stepped beyond the church gate towards the open-top phaeton carriage that awaited them. The horses had been dressed in flowers woven through their reins and harnesses, and even the coach driver had a white rose in his top hat.

“Your Grace,” John turned to her and offered

her hand to help her in.

“Oh my. I do not think I will get used to being called that,” she said as she took his hand and stepped up into the carriage. John didn’t release her hand. Instead, he held tightly onto it as he followed her into the carriage and sat down beside her.

As the coach set off, they both waved at those following them down the road. They were all walking to the Montacule estate and would be a little distance behind them. As the carriage took a right turn at the end of the road towards Montacule, Emma felt how unusual this was.

“How strange.”

“What is?” John asked at her side, using her hand to pull her closer towards him and

thread his other arm around her.

“I am so used to heading back to my brother’s estate from this point. Now, that is no longer my home. Montacule is my home instead!” she said with glee as she pointed to beyond the trees where glimpses of the stone house could be seen.

“I hope Montacule is as good a home as your old one was,” John said sweetly, playing with her gloved fingers.

“I’m sure it will be. I have always loved it,” she said honestly, sinking into his side. “And I must confess some delight in knowing that I will be settled just a short walk away from Arthur and Anne.”

“Has Miss Braithwaite’s mother calmed down from her shock yet?” John asked knowingly

with raised eyebrows.

“Not in the slightest,” Emma said. “She was so convinced Anne was to be a spinster; she can hardly understand how Anne is not only to marry a duke but marry a duke she fell in love with.”

“Marrying for love.” John sighed with clear contentment. “For a long time, I never thought I would be so lucky,” he said as he continued to play with her gloved fingers.

“Neither did I,” she accepted, looking back up to him, “but I cannot tell you how happy I am that it has happened.”

“Neither can I,” he said, inching towards her a little more.



They'd never had a chance for a kiss. Following their betrothal, Arthur had played the part of the eager chaperone with so much insistence that even Anne had drawn attention to it, likening him to some bird of prey, like a kestrel, watching over the two of them for the slightest hint of physical intimacy. He claimed his protectiveness had simply become stronger after Lord Bolton's incident.

"We have no chaperone anymore," Emma whispered to John, just as his lips hovered over hers.

"Indeed, we don't," he said, smiling back at her. "I was just thinking ..."

"Yes?" she asked, somewhat distracted by the near kiss. As he lifted himself straight again, she had to blink a couple of times to concentrate on his words.

“What a shame it was I never danced with you at the Bath Assembly rooms when I had the chance.”

“Yes, it was, a great shame!” she said, watching as he laughed heartily.

“Maybe then we could have done this much sooner,” he said, leaning towards her again.

“I would have waited for it. This is worth the wait,” she whispered to him breathlessly.

“I would have waited forever for you, Emma,” he said before pressing his lips to hers in a kiss.

# **THE END**

*Can't get enough of Emma and John? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](http://abigailagar.com/john) to find out...*

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Click the link or enter it into your browser  
<http://abigailagar.com/john>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**Mismatched with an Earl**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



MISMATCHED  
WITH AN  
EARL

ABIGAIL AGAR

# Mismatched with an Earl

## Introduction

As the young and intelligent Selena Dankworth returns home with her father, she witnesses a carriage robbery that will turn her life upside down. Even though her bravery saves Lord Ainsworth and his mother from the bandits, she gets overwhelmed by his ungrateful and pompous behaviour. Yet, in the weeks to come, Selena will be forced to cooperate with the unbearable Earl, in order to separate their parents, who fell in love after the accident. When their first effort fails, she sacrifices her freedom and agrees to a fake engagement with the Earl. However, when the

plan succeeds, Selena will find herself in distress, as her pure feelings for him have started to grow... Will her concerns about her low status stand in her way of finding true love?

Nicholas Addington, the Earl of Ainsworth, a charming but proud man, has spent the last year trying to live up to his father's memory. Yet, his world will be shaken after being attacked by bandits and rescued by a mysterious woman, who looks like no one he has met before. Little did he know that he would soon act to be engaged to this wildflower, in order to rescue his mother from a foolish plan. However, his initial disapproval

of Selena's character will turn against him when their scheme leads to a fascinating romance. When Nicholas gets to know Selena more, his disdainful attitude towards her will turn into undeniable affection... Once their little act is revealed, will he be able to let go of her?

Selena and Nicholas' lives intertwine under the most unexpected circumstances, and even if they do not wish to admit their self-consuming feelings for each other, they fall deeper in love every day. However, when their mismatch seems to turn into a dreamy love story, a wicked lady, who hopelessly craves the Earl, will threaten their happy ending...



After everything, can this turbulent affair, that started off as a fraud, become something more? Will Selena and Nicholas manage to overcome their pride for the sake of unconditional love or will their lives take separate ways forever?

# Chapter 1

*What do people enjoy about the countryside? 'Tis merely miles upon miles of trees, dirt, and animals.*

Sinking deeper into his seat, Nicholas closed his eyes as he tipped his head back. He was tired of seeing the same scenery over and over again, yet they still had a good way to go before reaching Putton.

*Boring, old Putton. Even the name is terrible! Why didn't Father just* □ His head snapped forward as the carriage briefly launched into the air before settling back into its rambling pace with a hard jolt. Cursing under his breath, Nicholas cupped the back of his neck, squeezing gently.

“Remind me again why Father chose this part of the countryside to buy land and lease it out?”

His mother looked up from her embroidery, her hand poised in the air. The countess didn't appear bothered by the carriage's sudden movement. Not a hair was out of place; not even her shawl, artfully draped across her shoulders, had budged. Nicholas couldn't understand how his mother managed to keep a neat stitch when they were tossed about every five minutes. He'd be fortunate to have all his teeth when this journey was through!

“Putton is a lovely little rural town, Nicky. Do you not recall how you used to love accompanying your father as a young boy? You enjoyed the countryside then.”

Nicholas used to look forward to those trips, but his interest had waned as he grew up and

saw all there was to life beyond the countryside. London drew his soul like a poet to his muse, offering much excitement, allure, and intrigue, and far better suited his taste for a thriving social life.

“I was a boy then, but I’m a man now with different preferences. Thank goodness I ceased to leave London some years ago.”

After the old earl had realised that Nicholas preferred to remain in London for the autumn and winter seasons, his father ceased to make the trip to their country estate an obligatory one. However, Nicholas could not avoid it this year. The earl had passed away at the end of last winter, shrouding the family in mourning until very recently.

A lump formed in Nicholas’ throat as it suddenly occurred to him that the old man would no longer be around for many milestones such as his wedding and Sarah’s

first Season.

“For what it is worth, I am glad that you are personally speaking to our tenants and employees,” his mother said. “They all respected your father, and I know they will respect you as well.”

Nicholas wasn't so sure about that. It wasn't that he didn't want to earn their respect, but he knew many of his father's employees, close friends, and all those who had looked up to the old earl expected Nicholas to fail.

“Unfortunately, I do not share your confidence, Mother,” Nicholas replied. “Not even Downey seems to believe I will do this role justice.”

Downey, his father's steward, had offered to make the trip to Putton with him, which was

merely the man's way of saying that Nicholas would not be able to make a success of it alone. Nicholas had become more determined than ever before to show the man that he was his father's son.

*I may have had a bit too much fun in the past, but I never shirked my responsibilities. I did everything short of taking over.*

“Did Downey tell you that?” his mother asked.  
“That doesn't sound like him.”

“No, he didn't, but I read between the lines. It's any wonder that he agreed to stay behind. At one point, I thought he would insist against my wishes.”

Nicholas was quick to admit that the steward knew more than him, but a person could learn. He could have requested Downey's

guidance, but Nicholas' pride had taken enough hits. Now, he needed to show the doubting steward and everyone else that he was worthy of being the new earl.

“He is only concerned about you, Nicky,” his mother argued. “Downey has been with your father for over thirty years – that’s longer than you have been alive. He has seen this family through its ups and downs and merely wishes to keep your father’s legacy alive.”

“I am Father’s legacy, Mother. I bear the title, thus ‘tis I who must uphold our family name. An heir and servant – no matter how honoured – are miles apart in importance. ‘Tis not Downey who will be criticised if things go wrong.”

The countess stretched her hand towards him to pat his knee. “Cheer up, dear. Nothing will go wrong. Only have faith that this trip will be successful. You’ll return to London knowing

that your Father is proud of you.”

Nicholas knew his mother was trying to make him feel better, but the mention of his father being proud of him sat like a rock in his belly.

*He'll be proud if I can assure our tenants that I will treat them as fairly as he did. But if they doubt my ability to manage our estates, then 'tis Father's disappointment I will have on my head.* His father may not physically be with them, but Nicholas felt the man's influencing weight as heavily as the coat he wore.

*I do not know if I will live up to your memory, Papa.* He paused, realising he had said ‘Papa’ instead of ‘Father’. Nicholas had used ‘Papa’ until he had felt he was too old to do so and exchanged it for the more formal ‘Father’.

*Perhaps I find this entire matter daunting and feel*



*like a boy again.* His father would probably tell him to chin up and get to it.

“Let’s not jinx things by declaring how the trip will end. I’d rather go in not knowing and prepared for the worst.”

The countess chuckled. “You sound just like your father. He wasn’t a pessimistic man, but he was never quick to call anything a success until it was an absolute outcome. He was mindful like that. I believe you will do just fine, dear. Why don’t you have a little nap? If I’m correct, we still have another hour before we reach Putton.”

Nicholas inwardly groaned. Another hour? He couldn’t recall the trip being this long, but he had to consider that he had been fourteen when he last accompanied his father on his yearly trips. Excitement and age had made all the difference.

“A nap sounds good, but I do not want to look like I slept all the way to Putton. People will think I’m weak, and that is not the first impression I wish to portray. It’s a bad message.”

“What message would that be?”

Did he have to spell it out for her? “That I’m sleeping on the job or that I cannot handle the pressure of running Father’s estates.”

“Do you truly believe they will think all that just because you took a nap?” said his mother with choked back laughter. “Surely not! Even your father took naps, Nicky. It’s hardly something that someone should pass judgement on.”

“But he had already proven himself, hadn’t he?” Nicholas countered. “No one minded his slumber because they trusted him. I have yet to gain their trust.”

The countess sighed, setting aside her embroidery. “I admit that it’s important to show everyone you are fit to fill your father’s shoes, but you have much to learn, and mistakes are unavoidable. Do you think that your father knew precisely what to do all the time?” the woman asked. “It took multiple failures before true success came, and it will be the same with you. You are your father’s son, Nicky. Do not ever doubt that.”

His mother settled the embroidery back on her lap, giving him a stern but playful look. “Now, go to sleep, and I’ll wake you up fifteen minutes before we reach the town’s perimeter. That should be enough time to straighten your clothing and wipe the sleep from your eyes.”

Nicholas was tired, and sleep sounded like just the right antidote to give him the energy he felt necessary to meet his father's tenants and employees. No, they were his tenants and employees. Nicholas needed to remember that. He was the Earl of Ainsworth; thus, everything now belonged to him and was his responsibility.

His responsibility. Nicholas' stomach churned, his nausea rising to the surface.

*No, no, I'm fine. There is nothing to fear.* He took out his handkerchief, dabbing brow and drenched upper lip. The devil take it! Even his palms were sweating. Grabbing his knees, Nicholas took several deep breaths.

"Dear? Is something the matter?" his mother enquired. "You look rather pale."

“I’m fine, Mother,” he said between clenched teeth.

“And I’m a young girl on her way to be sacrificed to appease the fey.”

What was his mother talking about? If that were sarcasm, then he would thank her to keep it to herself.

“Would you open the window?” he asked.  
“The air seems stale.”

“Of course, dear. Perhaps we should stop the carriage and let you have a rest. This jostling about cannot be doing you any good. Is it your stomach?”

“No, stopping,” Nicholas insisted. “The

window will suffice. I must have eaten something to upset my stomach.”

The countess looked worried, but she nodded and opened the window, letting the crisp spring air fill the enclosure. Nicholas removed his outer coat despite the chill, clumsily pulling at his necktie. Why did it feel as though everything was trying to suffocate him?

*Perhaps I cannot be the man my father was after all.*

“Are you improved?” his mother asked minutes later.

Was he? His nausea had abated, but Nicholas’ insides still felt like a knotted ball of twine.

“Much,” he lied.

“I’m relieved. It would be terrible to feel ill on your first official trip to Putton as the new earl.”

His mother meant well by the comment, but it worsened his condition. Nicholas’ belly clenched, pushing up the bile he had fought so hard to keep down. *I can no longer hold it in.* Brow sweating, he used his stick to tap the carriage floor.

His mother appeared alarmed. “Dear?”

Nicholas said nothing, focusing his attention on not letting hours of compressed bile cover the carriage’s interior. The contraption slowed, but it wasn’t fast enough for Nicholas. He shot off his seat, throwing the door open before

bolting out with a flying leap and almost crumpling to the ground when his ankle bent in on itself.

“Nicky!” he heard his mother shriek. “Oh, do stop this darned carriage!”

Nicholas launched himself over a jutting rock, ignoring the sharp pain to his chest as he emptied his belly out of sight. Finally spent, he turned onto his back and slid to the ground, his neck hanging nearly to his chest. He heard footsteps crunching on the grass and recognised it as his mother.

“Heavens, Nicky! I knew you were not well. Why did you insist on coming here when we could have done it later?”

Nicholas didn't have the energy to answer. Not only did he feel weak, but ashamed as well.



He was a grown man, but he was readily undone at the thought of failing.

The countess knelt in front of him, putting a hand on his knee. Nicholas rolled his head up, his light brown curls obscuring his view. His mother gently pushed them away, handing him a bottle.

“Rinse your mouth and drink,” she ordered.

She shuffled closer, helping him tip the bottle into his mouth. Nicholas tasted clean, fresh water and deduced it came from their family spring. He swirled it in his mouth, appreciating the coolness, before spitting it out to the side. Taking a long swig, he returned the bottle to his mother with a smile.

“Thank you. It’s just what I needed. We should get going.”

Nicholas moved to rise, but his mother pressed a hand on his chest, keeping him in place.

“Not yet. Sit for a little while, listen to the birds, and let the sun work its restorative powers on you. You’re still too pale, and I will not chance you growing worse.”

Nicholas thought to argue, but the fear and worry he witnessed in his mother’s eyes swayed his intention.

“I thought you said the sun was ageing on one’s skin,” he teased.

“Excessive sun is harmful, but I do enjoy its warm rays first thing in the morning. Unfortunately, I become as red as Uncle Fred’s

face when he has had one too many. I envy women who can turn a light golden colour, although it isn't at all fashionable."

The countess made herself comfortable beside Nicholas, clearly not minding that the contents of his belly lay several feet away from them. *Such is a mother.* He hoped his own wife would be as loving and attentive to their children. *If I manage to find one amidst all these responsibilities.* Nicholas was counting on the London Season to provide a wide variety of eligible women to choose from. Coming to Putton now was necessary if he were to return to London in time to observe and select the perfect bride.

Perhaps fifteen minutes or so passed in companionable silence before Nicholas decided he had had enough of nature. He doubted his belly would cause a raucous since it was well and truly empty. Also, his concern about arriving late to the first meeting with his managers was enough to make him man up and take on the challenges as they came.

“Time waits for no man, Mother,” he said, standing up and holding out his hand to her. “Mr Wickham must not be kept waiting.”

The countess rose to her feet gracefully, arranging her dress and picking off nature’s little hang-ons.

“You sound much improved, dear, and you are perfectly correct. Mr Wickham is not one for tardiness. Even your father did his best never to be late. What is the time now?”

Nicholas pulled out his pocket watch, his eyes widening. “I have exactly forty-five minutes to make the meeting. How far is our estate from here?”

“Well,” his mother said, looking around as she observed their surroundings. “I vaguely recognise this part of the woods. I’m sure we have not far along to go, dear. We’ll tell Jamie to drive a little faster.”

Which meant they would be late. Could this day get any worse? Sighing, Nicholas helped his mother into the carriage and tapped once on the roof to get it going. They had not gone three miles when he heard pistol shots fired and galloping horses approaching their carriage.

“What the devil!” he swore, sticking his head out of the window.

“Nicky!” his mother cried, alarmed. “Don’t do that!”

“How else am I to see what’s happening?”

Men on horses passed dangerously close to them, their voices guttural as they yelled. Nicholas heard his horses give a frightened neigh as Jamie cried in fear, their carriage violently rocking from side to side. Nicholas gripped his mother's arm, struggling to keep her in place as the carriage tossed them about. Shots were fired into the air again, accompanied with chaotic howls intended to frighten the listener.

“Highwaymen!” Nicholas spat in disgust.

“Highwaymen?” his mother said weakly, her voice shaking. “There haven’t been any in all the years I travelled with your father to Putton.”

That may be, but Nicholas knew he was right. He only had a few moments to think before

the highwaymen would inevitably force them out of the carriage and take all their possessions. The scoundrels continued to fire shots into the air, shouting at Jamie to get down. Feeling for his concealed pistol, Nicholas ordered his mother to remain inside while he went out to hopefully talk the men out of harming his mother. He had his pistol on hand if things went askew.

Nicholas first stuck a tentative head out of the carriage door window, counting the men he could see.

“Seven,” he muttered under his breath. “We’re definitely outnumbered, but I cannot allow anything to happen to Mother.”

It was funny how he felt calm at this moment, and yet the mere thought of failing his father had emptied his stomach contents moments before. Perhaps he worked better under life-or-death situations.

Nicholas observed the highwaymen, knowing they probably wouldn't listen to him. Perhaps if he could sneak outside and ambush them, he might turn the situation around.

“It's the only thing I can think of right now.”

He slowly opened the door, pulling back when his mother yanked on his shirt.

“Where are you going?” she hissed with a slight tremor. “Are you insane?”

“I'm doing what I have to. Do you have your pistol on you?”



His mother patted her carpetbag. "Your father taught me never to keep it far away."

"Good. Keep it in the folds of your dress. If anyone tries to come inside the carriage, shoot them."

"What?" she cried aghast. "I couldn't possibly! Where will you be? Are you planning to get yourself killed, Nicholas Addington? I will not have it, you hear? Just give them what they want."

Nicholas couldn't chance that. Although fifty-four, his mother was still a stunning woman. He would never forgive himself if someone took advantage of her.

"Stay here and keep quiet!" he commanded. "I'll be back."

Nicholas pushed the door open, keeping his eyes on the scene in front of him. Unfortunately, he should have watched his back as well. He heard his mother shriek before a blunt object thumped him on the back of his head.

Nicholas faltered, losing his grip on the door before he fell out, landing on the ground with a hard thud. Despite the pain, all he could think about was his mother. Groaning, he rolled onto his back and tried to get up but found he couldn't. His vision grew blurry, but Nicholas did see a large shape standing above him just before darkness swept him under.

## Chapter 2

Selena lightly tapped her foot on the carpeted floor, willing her father to look her way. If she had known the reason behind her aunt's invitation was to find her a suitor, Selena would have never come.

*I daresay Papa knew precisely what Aunt Tally was up to, but he said not a word.* The suitor was handsome, mind you, but hadn't a penny of sense in his head.

“Selena darling, why don't you tell Peter about your trip to Spain last summer?” Aunt Tally suggested. “You know, our Selena is part Spanish, which accounts for her exotic colouring. Her eyes are from her English side, of course, which makes for a striking appearance. Have you ever seen anyone with such lovely violet eyes? And those lashes?”

There's not a woman alive who wouldn't envy her."

Selena wanted to stand on the table and turn this way and that so Peter could get a good look at her. *It might be easier that way.* She certainly felt like she was on a servant's block, waiting for someone to look at her teeth, hair, and skin before purchasing her.

"I also speak several languages, can decipher hieroglyphics, and have a pet cat called Lucifer who scratches the eyes out of any man who comes within a foot of me."

Selena ended her sentence with a sweet smile, which she knew made her look slightly deranged but adorable. *I cannot be too offensive.*

"Oh, dear," her father muttered.

Everyone grew silent, and poor Peter knew not where to look. *I do like his pale-yellow curls and strong chin, but his mind leaves much to be desired.* The man couldn't stop talking about his prized horses and the thrill of the hunt! If Peter wasn't on about that, he threw in talk about his inheritance and yearly allowance. While some women would find his fortune interesting, Selena didn't. She had no designs ever to wed.

“Well,” Aunt Tally began. “I’m sure Lucifer will love Peter. Anyway, I have never known him to gouge anyone’s eyes out,” the woman said unconvincingly. “He’s a sweet cat.”

Selena wouldn't bet on that. She had trained Lucifer to attack any man who bothered her with words of affection or marriage. He hadn't gouged out any eyes yet, but he had given enough scratches to fend off would-be suitors. Of course, the cat wasn't a complete devil.

Lucifer was rather loveable and always followed her about like a lapdog.

The other animals were afraid of him, but that was to be expected. Selena had rescued Lucifer as a kitten when his owner had got it into their head that the black cat was bad luck and was causing all sorts of calamities in his family's life. That was complete nonsense, so Selena had offered to take him in. Lucifer quickly established his reign on the estate and kept the other animals in line.

"Perhaps I should go," Peter suggested. "I do not wish to take advantage of your hospitality, Mrs Ferguson."

"Oh, no, no, dear!" Aunt Tally protested. "I assure you that will never happen. Isn't that so, Selena? We Dankworths are known for our hospitality."

The woman looked at Selena meaningfully, wringing her hands. Poor Aunt Tally seemed to think it her responsibility to get Selena married because she had no mother, but that was hardly reason enough to bombard her with monthly dinners and luncheons complete with eligible men. This weekend had been the last straw, and she was ready to leave.

*We should have left on Sunday, but Papa can never say no to his sister.* Selena's father couldn't say no to any woman, for that matter, which was why she had to look after him. Countless women had tried to become the next Mrs Dankworth, but none of them had been right for her father.

Most had talked about what they would do with the house once they became the 'Lady of the Manor', while others had threatened to kick Selena out of the house if she didn't play by their rules. Selena didn't take kindly to threats, and those women eventually discovered that for themselves. *Never threaten*

*a daughter who has the heart of her father.*

“Peter must have somewhere to go, Aunt Tally,” said Selena. “We Dankworths are not ones to keep others hostage when they wish to leave. In fact, Papa and I have to go as well.”

Aunt Tally shot her a withering look, but Selena’s smile didn’t falter. Two could play at that game. She would probably get an earful once Peter left, but Aunt Tally was all bark and no bite. She was really a sweet woman who meant well, but at times she meant a little too well for Selena’s liking.

“Surely you won’t leave now, Philip?” Aunt Tally asked.

Selena turned sharply to her father, wondering what he would say. She had made it clear that she wished to leave, but would he listen? He,



too, had been bothering her about marriage lately and seemed to agree with his sister about marrying her off to a good man. *Why is it that a man can remain a bachelor no matter what age he is, but a woman cannot?*

“Ahem.” Her father coughed, clearing his throat. “Well, uh, you see—”

“I knew you would see it my way!” Aunt Tally exclaimed. “There you go, Peter. We can all remain here and have a delightful dinner this evening. Cook is preparing a special menu that is sure to please the palate.”

Selena’s mouth hung open for several seconds before she closed with a harrumph. The woman was behaving more aggressively than usual. Selena was only twenty-one. Surely she had a good two more years before things became desperate?

At the end of it all, Peter went home, and Selena had to put up with Aunt Tally's lecture about chasing good men off. It was something Selena had heard before, so she merely listened and made the right noises until her aunt's shoulders slumped forward. Selena had never seen her so despondent before.

“What am I going to do with you, child?” she asked. “Philip, speak to your daughter, please. She needs to understand that a woman needs a man by her side. It's not easy being a woman all alone in this world. I want you to marry a good man and have a family of your own. Is that so much to ask for?”

Perhaps her life wasn't typical for a young woman, but Selena had never felt that she fitted in with the norm. What did it matter if she wanted to remain unmarried and live with her father just as she was doing right now?

“We should leave this matter, for now, Tally,” said her father. “We can discuss this another time.”

“No, Philip,” Aunt Tally protested. “Why should I allow my niece to be mocked by others all because she is too stubborn?”

Ah, so that was the problem. Selena was willing to bet her collection of rare medieval manuscripts that Aunt Tally’s friends had been around recently and had said a few things that upset the woman.

*I keep telling her to find better friends.* Selena left her seat to sit next to her aunt, placing her arms around the stiff woman.

“I love you dearly, Aunt Tally, so I say this with much affection: stop listening to mindless gossip and chatter from women with cotton

for brains. You're too intelligent for that. We're Dankworth's, after all."

Aunt Tally softened, placing her head against Selena. "But they're right, dear. That's what makes it harder to bear. Mrs Muller's daughter is now married, and she's a year younger than you. I hate anyone thinking my niece cannot find a suitor. If you wanted, you could have dozens of men lining up outside your door to court you, but you've got it into your head that you will remain a spinster for all your life. Why?"

"Marriage is not for everyone," Selena replied.

Aunt Tally moved her head away to give her a puzzled look. "You say that like you mean it. I keep hoping you will change your mind one day." She looked at her brother. "I suppose you've done nothing to deter your daughter from her life choices. You've always got your nose stuck in your books!"

Selena's father turned bright pink. "Now, now, Tally. No one tells Selena anything. She's just like her mother. I could never deny Adriana anything."

Aunt Tally sighed, undoubtedly exasperated with them both. "Hopeless, both of you. I suppose you wish to leave now. I'll have Wilkins bring your luggage to the door."

The woman dropped a kiss on Selena's head before she left the room. Selena immediately shot her father a questioning look, seeking an explanation. He squirmed a little, twirling the end of his moustache.

"I know what you are going to say," he said. "But I only did it for your own good. Tally convinced me that this is best for you. I would not be a good father if I did not try to change

your mind.”

“I am not leaving your side, Papa. I have made this crystal clear to you on several occasions.” Annoyed, she stood up. “I’m going to help Wilkins with the bags.”

The butler would probably tell her no, but Selena wanted to do something. She felt agitated, and not just because of her aunt and father’s antics. Selena could sense something significant was going to happen; her senses fairly tingled with the expectation. She had everything she could possibly want or need in her life. What more could there be?

Selena stared out of the carriage window, her mind too occupied to see anything. Aunt Tally lived several miles out of town, which made

the journey there and back a bit tiresome when all one wished to do was reach home and curl into a favourite armchair with a book. Selena had never been a girl who wished to venture out of her town and see the world. She loved Putton and had no intention of moving anywhere else. Once a year, she did make a trip to Spain to be with her mother's family, but Selena would always count down the days until she could be home again.

“Are you still vexed with me?” her father asked.

Selena turned to him as she shook her head. “No, but I am annoyed. This trip was useless, and you know it well. You and aunt Tally will have to one day accept that I am not like other girls. My place is with you.”

Her father's kind eyes grew sad. “But I will not be with you forever, Lena.”

Selena's father was the only one who called her Lena. Her mother used to call her *mi cielito* or *mi bella*. Ten years had passed since her mother had died, but Selena continued to miss her as much as if it were just yesterday. People had promised her that the grief would become lighter, but that wasn't true. Selena learnt to deal with the pain, but it never went away.

"I don't want to think about that," she stated, looking away.

How could her father remind her of his mortality? Selena was terrified of losing her father and never wanted to leave his side. What if she went away for just one day and came back to find he was no more? The thought suffocated her. *Breathe, Selena.*

"I cannot live forever, even if I wanted to. Won't you consider marriage? Should



anything happen to me—”

“It won’t,” Selena snapped. “Not if I’m here to look after you. Who else will chase away those women who seek to marry you? Terrible women, I might add.”

Everyone knew that Philip Dankworth was a wealthy man and owned several properties. Some were inherited land, and others had been purchased over the years. What people didn’t know was most of that land belonged to her. Selena’s father had ensured that, married or not, she would be taken care of long after he died.

“I admit that I have been fooled once or twice, but I’m not completely blind to their tricks.”

Selena arched her eyebrows. “Is that so? If you can name one situation where I did not have

to save you, then please, enlighten me.”

Philip Dankworth was a romantic at heart and fell easily in love. Fortunately, he was more so in love with the idea of it, and not necessarily the woman. This made it easier for Selena to wake him up from his self-induced lull and reveal the woman’s true nature before she could sink her claws into him.

“Very well, point taken,” her father admitted. “Why must you always be right?”

“You taught me never to involve myself in an argument I cannot win. I hold my tongue when needed and unleash it when I have the right weapons.”

He grinned. “I’ve raised a warrior.” His smile quickly died. “Your aunt would say that’s not necessarily a good thing. Perhaps I’ve done

more harm than good.”

“A man who cannot appreciate intelligence in a woman is no man at all.”

“You’re throwing my words back at me,” her father accused.

“Would you have it any other way? I am my father’s daughter.”

Selena watched her father’s moustache twitch, but he didn’t smile. “You’re also your mother’s daughter, but I seem to be overtaking her influence in your life. Perhaps I have not been a good father after all.”

“You’re not foolish enough to believe that. Simply ...”

Selena frowned as she stopped talking, tilting her head to the side. Were those shots she could hear?

“What is it, dear?” her father pressed. “You didn’t complete your sentence.”

“I think I hear pistols firing. Don’t you?”

Her father’s brow gathered in the middle as his body stilled. They seemed to be travelling towards the noise because it was growing louder. Selena stuck her head out of the window and could just about glimpse a gleaming carriage up ahead with several riders on horseback coming out of seemingly nowhere.

“I hear it,” her father said. “Who on earth could be firing pistols in such a manner? That’s terribly dangerous!”

Selena knew precisely who they were. “Highwaymen.”

Her father’s eyes widened. “Surely not! That’s the eighth attack in the last six months.”

“It’s certainly them, Papa. We must tell Roger to stop the carriage before we run into the thicket of whatever is going on up ahead.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” her father replied, looking worried.

He tapped on the roof twice, bringing the carriage to an almost immediate stop. Selena

wanted to get a closer look at what was happening, but her father halted her movements.

“Where are you going?”

“I wish to see what’s happening. I’ll keep to the woods if that makes you feel better.”

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. I will not have my only daughter traipsing through the woods and into certain doom. If those are highwaymen, then they are dangerous. They would think nothing about taking advantage of a young woman.”

“I know, Papa, but what if those people are in need? The highwaymen are undoubtedly about to attack that carriage. The victims could be people we know! We cannot simply sit by and allow harm to come to them. You

have your pistol with you. So does Roger. All I wish to do is get a closer look. I'll have Samson come with me if that settles your doubts."

Her father looked at her like she had lost her mind. "What father sends his daughter into danger?"

"I have my slingshot with me, and you know I am skilled at hiding among the trees. They will never see me."

"Dear me," Selena's father muttered. "A slingshot against several pistols. What does she think?"

"What would the reverend think about your faith, Papa? Don't you recall the story about David and Goliath?"

“Don’t speak about Biblical stories at a time like this! That was a totally different matter. Besides, David was a young man, and you are a woman. Not even God would send a woman into battle.”

Selena fought the urge to roll her eyes. “You and Roger can follow behind me. Samson and I will keep to the trees, and that’s that. Just think: would I not be safer hiding away than here with you? The highwaymen might come this way.”

That got her father thinking. “I suppose you’re right. Again. Very well, run off into the woods, and do not come out until it is absolutely safe. No heroics, Selena,” he said sternly.

“Duly noted, Papa.” Selena pulled out her slingshot from her dress’ pocket. She always kept it on her out of habit. “This is just for



precaution,” she said.

“See to it that you do not use it,” her father called after her as she jumped down.

“I won’t!” she cried back. “Unless I need to,” she continued under her breath.

Selena convinced an unwilling Samson to accompany her into the woods, carefully making their way closer to where all the chaotic noise seemed to be coming from. Eventually, they were but feet away from the scene unfolding before them.

“Get down, Samson!” she whispered. “They might see us.”

They both immediately crouched behind trees,

peeking their heads around the trunk to watch the chaos.

“We should turn back and leave, Miss,” said Samson, his voice trembling.

“Not yet. Look at how the driver is shivering from fright! Those darn highwaymen are the absolute worst. Someone needs to teach them a lesson.”

“Surely that won’t be you?” asked Samson.

His pallor had paled, and his knuckles were white as he gripped the tree bark.

“Release the tree before you lose your nails,” she warned him. “And yes, I do intend to do something. Villains tend to be superstitious, or

at least that is what I have heard. I wonder what they would think about stones flying out of the woods?”

“Stones flying out of the woods?”

Selena proceeded to show him precisely what she meant. She picked up a stone nearby and tucked it into the slingshot, pulling back until it was taut in her hands.

“Now, who shall I hit first?”

“Don’t do this, Miss,” Samson begged. “What if they come running after us?”

“Then we’ll climb the trees. Now, stop talking so I can take my shot.”

Samson gulped, lowered himself to the ground, and brought his knees to his chest. His lips started moving, but no sound came out.

*He must be praying.* Selena shrugged, closing one eye as she sought her first victim. She was well aware that what she was doing was dangerous, but she had had enough of these highwaymen. No one had done a thing to catch them or chase them off. She was angry enough to do something about them, even if it was risky.

Selena watched a beautiful man leave his carriage, gasping when a highwayman came up behind him and hit him on the back of the head with a bludgeon. The man collapsed in a heap at the highwaymen's feet, likely unconscious or worse. Inexplicable anger coursed through Selena. She had chosen her first target. Steadying her hand, Selena aimed for the side of his head and released. She knew she was a good shot and expected the stone to

land exactly where she had sent it.

It took mere seconds for the stone to meet flesh with a thwack. The man bellowed, falling against the carriage like a drunken sailor. Not losing momentum, Selena picked up another stone and sent it flying towards the man harassing the driver. It landed on his chest, the shock and force knocking him off his horse. Selena launched another at the man closest to her, hitting his hand and forcing him to drop his gun.

“Oi!” one of them yelled. “What’s going on? Who’s throwing stones?”

Another stone went whizzing toward them, hitting one rider on his back. The man arched his back, crying out.

“Stones are falling from the sky!” he shouted.

“Don’t be daft,” another argued.

Selena aimed her next stone at him, hitting his upper thigh. He clutched it, groaning.

*That will teach you to attack people.* Next, Selena picked up smaller stones and sent them all flying at once. They rained down upon the men, fuelling the one man’s belief that they were coming from the sky.

“I’m leaving!” the superstitious one yelled.

“Come back here,” the tallest one called.

Selena aimed a slightly larger stone at his

chest, hitting him with an oomph. The man curled in on himself, clutching his chest.

“Let’s go, Mad-Eye,” one of the highwaymen urged. “This isn’t worth dying over.”

*So that’s the tall one’s name. He certainly looks mad.* Mad-Eye turned to the woods, and Selena thought he would come over, but he seemed to think better of it. He pulled on his horse’s reins, drawing him away.

“Fine. We’ll leave, but I expect all of you to make up for it in the next one.”

*Cheeky fellow, aren’t you?* Just for that, Selena picked up another stone, placed it in her slingshot, and hit the horse’s flank. It neighed in surprise and bolted with its rider into the trees up ahead. The rest of the highwaymen followed, but Selena stayed hidden until her

father and Roger arrived minutes later. She had already defied her father by helping the strangers; she didn't want to push him any further. Selena hurried to her father's side as he spoke to the injured driver, and Roger saw to the unconscious man on the ground. Selena was once again struck by his beauty, more so now that she was near him.

*Even sleeping, he looks dashing.*

"Dear," Selena's father called. "Do look at the woman in the carriage. I fear she has fainted."

She waited for Roger to drag the man aside before she could step into the carriage. A middle-aged woman lay slumped on the seat but otherwise appeared unharmed. Selena poked her head out of the door, calling to her father.



“We’ll have to take them home and allow a physician to look at them.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” her father agreed. “What on earth made those highwaymen turn tail and run?”

“Stones from the heavens,” the driver replied, clutching his bloody eye.

Selena’s father looked sharply at her, but she wisely avoided his eyes.

*Let him yell at home, but we should help these people first.*

On their way home, Selena wondered if this was the significant event she had sensed earlier. More than that, she wondered who the

handsome stranger was. Her father had spoken to the driver and likely asked him, but Selena had not heard their conversation.

*I suppose I shall have to wait until we get home.*

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